KODANSHA BOX
忍物語
シノブモノガタリ
西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Shinobu Mustard

001

This spring, Harimaze Kie was a first-year that had just enrolled in Naoetsu Private High School and a part of the girls' basketball team, and naturally, she was extremely regretting both of those decisions. She was regretting having enrolled in the university-focused Naoetsu High that had a high standard score, and she was regretting having joined the girls' basketball team that was too Spartan for a school that was supposed to be university-focused.

After all, the Naoetsu High girls' basketball team had previously had a super high-school level superstar, and the team had actually competed on a national level. But, as mentioned above, that senior had already retired, and what remained for the next generation to inherit was simply an intense training regimen.

A sports club with intense training, even though they weren't good.

That was the worst.

It was an ancient style of training that was influenced by images of a golden age—a bloated self-projection of, "we're both human beings, so I should be able to reach her level".

In the first place, this superstar senior had ultimately sustained an injury to her left arm and opted for an early retirement, so a Spartan training regimen was really meaningless, or rather, it could even prove to be backfiring on the team… So why was the club still forcing its members to do bunny hops?

Having said that, she wasn't exactly willing to quit the club of her own accord. If the coach or the captain were to give her the cruel verdict of, "You have no talent so you should just quit," then she'd happily resign with that as the reason. But unfortunately—and perhaps this was also a remnant of the era in which a superstar was a member—the Spartan girls' basketball team had a strong sense of solidarity.

And a strong sense of solidarity meant a heavy sense of collective responsibility.

If quitting of her own accord could end up influencing her teammates in some way, then it was hard to even bring up the subject… If she even said a word of "wanting to quit", then it would stop being just her problem alone.

Even though it was a tradition that couldn't be right, she didn't want to be the cause of putting it to an end… She wanted the evil tradition to come to its natural end, praying that it wasn't made out to be her fault. Stemming from the collective responsibility was a desire to shift the responsibility onto someone else. And probably, the other

teammates were also continuing to endure the hard training with similar motives, their hands tied by similar ropes, all being foolish together.

And with that, it was today as well that Harimaze Kie had unwillingly participated in club activities right up until she was allowed to leave, dragging her two legs that ached with unending muscular pain down the dark evening path as she'd done for the past few months.

Her teammates all left in different directions, and obviously the time she left from school didn't coincide with her friends from class (in fact, her club activities had been so intense that she'd fallen out of contact with her friends from class), so she was returning home alone in a way that couldn't possibly be considered safe. She was even wondering if some bad guy wouldn't just come up and attack her already.

Even though she'd be able to triumphantly quit the club if she were to get badly hurt.

Even as she realized her thoughts had gone in too serious a direction, she could no longer control her thoughts anymore… She had become utterly exhausted from taking over the awful legacy that had meaninglessly remained, even as she knew it was backfiring.

Even her grades continued to decline.

It was true that practice was stopped before exams, but she'd found it hard to escape from the unspoken pressure of "training on your own" and "training in secret", and so her first midterm exams had resulted in awful scores that would have been unthinkable for her in middle school. And at this rate, her rank for the final exams was sure to fall in the triple digits.

Well, not all of it could be blamed on club activities.

The students that had gathered at this private, university-focused school had simply had grades so excellent it made her embarrassed for having evaluated herself as a prodigy just a few months before… She'd gotten depressed, thinking things like, "Won't I end up becoming the first dropout since Naoetsu High was founded?"

Ah, that's why I want to be attacked.

Somebody attack me. Beat me up.

Turn my life into chaos.

It could become an excuse for me to quit the club, and I might even get exempted from final exams… Then I can study while in the hospital and catch up on what I've fallen behind on. That's right, even if I wasn't a prodigy, I should be diligent enough to do that.

I can still redo everything.

Was this way of thinking just escapism?

(Escapism… Did that mean escaping *from* reality? Or did it

mean managing to escape *to* reality?)

To throw away her hopes and dreams, and focus on reality.

In a sense, that was also a form of escapism… But in any case, there was no bad guy that conveniently appeared to bash her head in on Harimaze Kie's way home. No matter how many times, how many days she prayed.

Ah, then it's fine even if it isn't some bad guy.

It's fine if I get run over by a car at some corner, and it's fine if an airplane crashes onto my exact location… If it can make it easier for me, then anything's fine.

Even if it isn't reality… Even if it's a fantasy.

Like.

Yes, even something like a monstrous apparition—

"This is something I think every time I come to this country, but… There isn't a phrase that makes me less thankful than 'Thanks for the meal'… And saying 'It was delicious' is practically the opposite of delicious."

As she came near a three-way intersection, and as she walked —no, as she painfully dragged her legs while looking at her smartphone to make it even easier for a bad guy to attack her from behind, Harimaze Kie was, very openly, approached from the front.

And, as if a self-introduction was a form of etiquette that could never be forgotten—

"I'm the great Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster. The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire."

Her hope had been granted. Or perhaps, her despair had been granted.

Thinking that, Harimaze Kie raised her head.

002

It had been a while since I'd been to a hospital.

However, it wasn't that I, Araragi Koyomi, was particularly afraid of syringes, nor did I have a fear of lab coats—in fact, I actually loved them. This is just between you and me, but there'd been one time that I'd made my girlfriend wear a lab coat… We'd roleplayed using a mechanical pencil as a syringe.

Regardless (as much as it made me fall into some frustrations), the reason I'd stayed away from hospitals regardless of anything was that, during spring break when I was still a 17-year-old high schooler, I'd had my blood sucked by the golden-haired and golden-eyed, iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, beautiful enough to send chills down my spine, and spent about 2 weeks as a vampire. And, because of the aftereffects, I had become completely free of injuries and diseases.

I was in such good health that I was almost tired of it.

Or rather, if I found myself getting examined at a hospital, then my aberrant regeneration abilities or superior eyesight could come to light, and I could end up being used as a sample for human experimentation… As a result, I'd even come up with an excuse to skip out on the physical examinations that occurred when entering college.

For the sake of my rose-colored campus life, there was no end to the caution I'd need to take… Regardless, the reason I came to the Naoetsu General Hospital this time was because I'd been personally called there by an adult that I owed more to than even my own parents.

By Gaen Izuko-san.

"So, what do you think, Koyomin? About this patient," said Gaen-san.

In a room on the fifth floor of the fourth ward, she spoke almost as if a doctor would—as if she were asking for my opinion. But I was in the science department and not the medical department, and if we were saying that, then not even Gaen-san was a doctor, either. Although, if it was her, it wouldn't be surprising if she had multiple doctor's licenses… Of course, while I had no intention of pretending to be a doctor at this point, after being prompted, I decided to give the bedridden "patient" a look.

Actually, because the single room wasn't all that big, that "patient" had already been in my field of vision since I'd entered, but it was just hard for me to look directly—I'd averted my eyes on reflex.

It felt like I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to.

The “patient” that was lying on the bed was,

“…A mummy.”

While it had been made to wear a patient gown for hospital use, at the very least, it did not seem like a living being—or so it seemed.

“This is a mummy, isn’t it? A human one, at that.”

When I was a high schooler, there’d been a time that I witnessed something like a mummified monkey, but from the physique, and from the hair that was still left on the head, even if they’d gotten completely dried up, I could tell for certain that this mummy was a human.

Even if they weren’t a living human.

They were certainly a dead human.

“No, no, this isn’t even a dead human, Koyomin.”

“…Um, Gaen-san. Isn’t it about time for you to stop calling me ‘Koyomin’? I’m already a college student now.”

“A college freshman is practically the same as a newborn baby, you know. It was the same for me. I would say, goo goo ga ga.”

She was totally unapproachable.

Well, it was a waste of breath. Considering this woman of unknown age, even once I became a full-fledged adult, she would probably still affectionately call me “Koyomin”… But anyway, what did she mean by, “this isn’t even a dead human”?

“It’s *alive*. Still. Even in this state.”

Gaen-san spoke without a moment’s hesitation—it was a composed, not overly dramatic way of speaking very much like a specialist, or rather, very much like the administrator of specialists.

However, as someone who wasn’t even close to being a specialist, it was a line I couldn’t overlook.

This mummy was still alive? Really?

I would’ve guessed this was some kind of *sokushinbutsu*, some kind of mummified monk, that had been brought from some temple… Although, thinking about it, it would be in bad taste even for Gaen-san to lay someone like that to rest in the bed of a hospital.

“Its heart is still beating, and it’s still breathing. Its bodily functions are almost disturbingly normal. Though there’s certainly no consciousness, it’s not dead yet… If you think it’s a lie, you can check for yourself.”

“Check for myself…”

Being told that, I nervously reached out a hand to feel the sleeping mummy’s heartbeat—but just before I touched it, I was rebuked with a, “Hold on, Koyomin”.

“That’s a girl, you know. Touching her chest is off-limits. You could at least take the lady’s arm to get a pulse like a gentleman.”

A girl? Considering it had gotten all dried up, it was impossible to tell the gender of the mummy—however, regardless of whether or not she was a lady, I couldn't ignore the fact that she was a girl.

"…Then, if you'll excuse me."

I touched the left wrist of the mummy. Since she was a mummy, I was worried that she'd crumble into bits if I touched her, so I'd tried to be as gentle as possible, but that dried-up skin was still surprisingly resilient.

And I certainly felt a pulse. Thump, thump, thump.

"I'll just say this right now, but there's not actually any blood flowing—*though her heart is still beating, there's no blood circulating*."

It's just air circulating—said Gaen-san.

"Just air in a hollow body. Like it's completely empty."

"……"

As I listened to Gaen-san speak, unsure whether the line was supposed to be a joke or a fact, I pushed aside the mummy's hair to carefully check the girl's neck—and, as expected.

Two small holes had been pierced into her neck.

As if she'd been bitten by a snake.

Or, as if she'd been taken in by an *oni*.

"……"

"Harimaze Kie is the name of that mummy. A female student of the school you used to go to, Naoetsu High… But since she's a freshman that started this year, I don't think she's an acquaintance of yours."

"…Was she attacked by a vampire?"

Though I'd internally gotten flustered at the name of my alma mater suddenly showing up, I confirmed with Gaen-san something that didn't need to be said. It was so obvious that it definitely could've been left unsaid, but even so, I couldn't go without asking.

I gradually began to understand why I'd been called here.

"It seems so. On the way back from club activities, it seems she ran into one with a bang."

"Even though it'd been peaceful."

That was all I could say.

I had no intention of pretending that I understood anything.

However, everything started when I was attacked by a vampire during that spring break—the turmoil that ensued should have been brought to an end with my graduation ceremony, but to think that, just a few months later, a case like this would occur.

Well, it was possible that incidents like this occurred frequently across the world that I just didn't know about—if not for that, then Gaen-san, "the onee-san that knew everything", would be out of a job.

It was a terrible business opportunity.

It was a very niche livelihood—or rather, a niche death-lihood.

"So you're saying, this girl… Harimaze-chan? Did Harimaze-chan *turn into a vampire*?"

"Well, it seems that she *failed to turn into a vampire*."

Gaen-san shrugged.

"This is a fairly common occurrence. Successes like your case, Koyomin, are actually rarer. Although, with what happened, from the side of the vampire that sucked your blood, it was a huge failure for her."

Saying that, Gaen-san lowered her eyes to the linoleum that was characteristic of hospitals… That is, to my shadow on the floor.

Of course, there was no response from my shadow.

We were in broad daylight.

"Even though she's still alive, she's just barely not dead… Just a mummy with all its blood sucked out. Not on the verge of death, but still more dead than alive. Is that it…"

Even I could've become like this at that time… However, while a part of me was trembling, another part of me was relieved.

I had no intention of saying that it was fortunate that Harimaze-chan had her blood sucked by a vampire and turned into a mummy where it wasn't clear whether she was alive or not—but, as long as she was still alive, there was still hope.

And because of that, just like there had been for me, there must be a way to *turn her back into a human*—so the fact that her vampire transformation had failed was a blessing in disguise.

In my case, I had no choice but to do something about it by myself through my own efforts and self-education, but in this case, the omniscient specialist Gaen-san was presiding over it… I wasn't exactly optimistic, but there had to be a way to help this girl out.

"'Help her', huh? Didn't my very own Hawaiian-shirt guy say something about that?"

"…I've already completely forgotten what *your* Hawaiian-shirt guy has said, but Gaen-san, it's not something you say, isn't it? You don't say anything like, 'You can't help her. People can only help themselves.'"

"It seems like you remember it, though."

Gaen-san gave a sarcastic laugh.

"Of course, I'm here to help this girl, Harimaze-chan. However, Koyomin. If you simply think that a homebody like me being out here from the beginning is 'dependable', then that would be troublesome for me," she said.

What did she say?

"Huh? What does that mean? If you're saying you can't be

depended on, Gaen-san, then who else is there that we can depend on?"

"That's a very nice thing to say, but before I explain, let's change locations."

"Change locations? To where?"

"We'll be making our rounds. Since it doesn't seem like you hate playing doctor, Koyomin, let me introduce you to the *next patient*."

It was a mystery how Gaen-san, who was neither a doctor nor a staff member of this hospital, was able to walk around as if she owned the place, but after seeing that a similar-looking mummy had been laid down in the bed of the next room over, I decided to come to the conclusion that the director of this hospital was the one who made the request to this specialist.

With these patients who had had all the fluids sucked out of their bodies and yet for some reason were still alive, if two were brought in in quick succession, it wasn't exactly something that modern medicine could do anything about… It had to be the work of the occult.

"This girl is called Honnou Aburi-chan. Another student of Naoetsu High—however, she's a second-year, so it's possible that even Koyomin knows her."

Unfortunately.

During my high school days, I wasn't exactly the sort that interacted much with my juniors.

Or rather, I hadn't even gotten accustomed to school enough to remember the names of students in other years… If she was currently a second-year, that meant that when I was a third-year, she was a first-year.

It was possible that I'd at least seen her face before, but because she was a mummy, and because she'd been made to wear a patient gown, I had no way of identifying her by her appearance… If I had to be completely honest, I couldn't even distinguish her from the mummy in the previous room.

"Harimaze-chan's mummy, which had been lying on the road, was discovered by a passerby the day before yesterday. Honnou-chan, who'd been found as a mummy at home in her own futon, was discovered last night by her mother."

"One person a day? That's quite a fast pace."

"It's not necessarily one person a day. There could be more that just simply haven't been discovered yet. Right now, it may just seem like only female students from Naoetsu High are being targeted, but there's a possibility this is only two out of a hundred victims."

Two out of a hundred. And that wasn't totally an exaggeration.

As for the vampire I personally knew, she boasted that she could stay alive even if she only drank the blood of a single person every few months, but on the other hand, she still had an appetite where she could suck the blood of all of humanity if she lost self-control.

However, in this case, I suppose I had to consider things based on Gaen-san's conjectures… There was some unidentified vampire targeting female students of Naoetsu High.

Unidentified… No.

The vampire I personally knew.

"Um, Gaen-san. Could it be possible that you're suspecting Shinobu? It's true that she'd been the subject of a rumor among the female students of Naoetsu High once before—"

"No, no, I've never once thought that to be the case. I only just realized when you asked me. It's not for that reason that I called you out, Koyomin, when you're enjoying your college life. I was just hoping to cooperate with you, as you know the lay of the land. So that we can prevent a 3rd victim, or perhaps a 101st victim."

Of course, you aren't a stranger to helping out a girl that you have absolutely no relation to—said Gaen-san, as if she were making fun of my personal history. Although I had nothing to say in response… It was because I got so desperate to help those I saw within range or within reach that I would end up troubling those who weren't within range and weren't within reach.

But, what should I do now?

After suddenly being shown not one, but two mummies in quick succession, and hearing that they were mummies of high school girls, I would inevitably be driven by a sense of moral obligation to help them, but fundamentally, a request made by Gaen-san wasn't something I could accept so readily.

For an adult that I couldn't know the true nature of, in a sense, she was scarier than a vampire.

Seeing that I stayed quiet instead of giving an immediate response, Gaen-san spoke.

"To be honest, the state of the board is such that I'd like to depend on Koyomin, too. A dependable Koyomin," she said. "It's a situation where someone like me, who likes working behind-the-scenes, had to be dispatched, you see. And if that's not enough, I can even say this… Right now, I'm taking measures to call that Yozuru back here."

"Eh… Kagenui-san?"

Perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised at that. However, I was still more than surprised—I was more surprised than I'd been after seeing two mummies in quick succession. At the very least, my reaction to Gaen-san's statement had to be more than what she'd anticipated.

To call that Yozuru back here.

Certainly, Kagenui-san, Kagenui Yozuru-san, was an *onmyouji* that specialized in immortal oddities, although it was hard to say that

she was a respectable specialist. If anything, she was the specialist in this world that strayed furthest from the correct path—once, in my high school days, when I'd worked with together Gaen-san on a job, even in spite of the fact that an immortal oddity had been involved, Gaen-san had stubbornly refused to rely on Kagenui-san.

That meant that Gaen-san was predicting that this current situation was *worse* than that time.

In that case, was this something I couldn't ignore? It's not like I particularly had any love for my alma mater (in fact, when I'd still been attending school, I'd absolutely hated it), I'd feel guilty about pretending that I was unrelated to it.

Plus, though I had had almost no interaction with students of other years, it wasn't like there was absolutely no one I knew among my underclassmen… If I imagined one of them becoming the victim of a vampire and turning into a mummy, I couldn't exactly keep calm.

"…However, the practical issue is, if Kagenui-san is going to come, then I don't think that really gives me a chance to act. Or rather, I'd probably just become a hindrance to her. Maybe if I were still a high schooler with stronger aftereffects of my vampirism, but due to various reasons, I've gotten a lot more subdued after entering college."

"That's true. Though you were such an enthusiastic boy back then, it makes me feel lonely to see you all subdued like this."

Yeah, yeah.

"However, Yozuru isn't exactly nimble enough in her footwork to come as soon as she's called. As you're well aware, there are some special circumstances for her. No matter how much she hurries, it'll still take a few days until she arrives in this town… And those few days could very well be crucial to the number of victims."

I see.

If we went that far, then I was now a college student with more than enough time on his hands. If we were speaking of nimbleness in footwork, then I was even better than when I was in high school. Even today, I'd voluntarily skipped my algebra course to respond to Gaen-san's summons.

To tell the truth, there were a lot of circumstances with Kagenui-san that made me feel that it was simply difficult to face her right now, but in that case, it was possible that we could end this oddity phenomenon before she arrived at this town.

And, needless to say, doing that was preferable for Gaen-san, as well.

"Oh yeah. If Kagenui-san's coming here, then I'll have to let Ononoki-chan know, as well… Or rather, Gaen-san, aren't you going to inform Ononoki-chan about this?"

“Well, she herself is in the middle of work on a different case. But it’s a secret from you, Koyomin.”

“?”

I wonder what it is.

It seemed that Ononoki-chan had recently been hanging out with Sengoku a lot, but if that was the case, then it was hard for me to probe into it… Especially after being specifically told that it was a secret.

“It’s important to not sweat the small stuff. If anything, this is just foreshadowing for the next installment. Nonetheless, I have no intention of pressuring you to work with me like I’d done before. If you can state in minute detail a legitimate reason as to why you’d like to flatly refuse getting involved with an incident that could possibly be traumatic, then I’ll quickly drop the matter. If that happens, I’ll call Kaiki.”

“Leave it to me!”

No matter how I saw it, it didn’t make sense for Gaen-san to think that that con man would make his entry for a phenomenon of this type, but if she brought out that name anyway, then I didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

If it was to keep him as far from this town as possible, I’d do anything.

Con men were prohibited from entering this town.

“Well, con men are prohibited from most towns. Of course, I won’t have you working for free. In exchange for the considerable risk you’re about to take, Koyomin, this friendly onee-san will be sure to offer the right amount of compensation.”

A considerable risk, you say?

Well, it was quite likely that I would end up facing off against a vampire, and it wasn’t like I could nonchalantly linger in safe zones… Not to mention, if I was going to get involved in a case estimated to be more dangerous than the revival of Shishirui Seishirou, I would need to be prepared for that much.

However, if you asked me whether or not I wanted compensation that corresponded to that level of risk, then honestly speaking, I didn’t really want it… Frankly, receiving anything from Gaen-san was scary.

The deeper our relations or obligations get, the further into the depths I’d fall.

Being called out each and every time like this was almost like not being able to graduate from high school no matter how much time passed—but as I thought about it like that, Gaen-san spoke as if she’d accurately guessed the contents of my mind.

“If you decide to cooperate in the resolution of this oddity

phenomenon, Koyomin… Until you graduate from college, that is, for the next four years or so, I won't appear in front of you again, and I won't even try to contact you. I swear it. You'll be able to go ahead with your bright and happy campus life, free from oddities and specialists," she said.

"For… For real?"

"Yes, for real. You'll never catch me in a lie or in twintails."

If it was Gaen-san in twintails, then I felt like I'd do anything to see that form, but this was a proposal that was even more attractive than that… Well, from another point of view it almost sounded like she was declaring that she'd cut ties with me, and if she swore that much it could even be a bit lonely (which sounded a bit selfish, even for me). But if it meant I could cleanly wash my hands of a life where I would be spoken to with an air of condescension whenever the chance arose, then there was no better compensation for me.

Well, it wasn't exactly clear how credible an oath made by the senior of that con man really was (it was even possible she'd done her hair up in twintails before), but, well, regardless of whether that promise was there, this certainly wasn't a situation that I could ignore.

All my reservations had been cleared up.

In the first place, for Gaen-san, I wasn't exactly a card that was easy to use. And it wasn't the same as with Kagenui-san. It was a problem of being *too* nimble in footwork. When it came to not moving within Gaen-san's predictions or directions, high school third-year Araragi Koyomi had been especially bad, if I do say so myself—now that I was remembering it, I had better repent for my behavior back then.

If an incident that forced Gaen-san's hand into using this worthless card was occurring in my hometown, then I absolutely couldn't just overlook this… That's right.

Sometimes, it was fine to help out people I didn't know.

"Understood. I'll do my best to work with you, to the extent that it doesn't interfere with my schoolwork—however, I don't want to cause trouble for my family, so I'd like for you to be considerate in that respect."

"Ah. Of course, I can do something about that. I'd be well aware of the relationship between Yozuru and Tsukihi-chan even if I wasn't an onee-san that knew everything—oh!"

Just as Gaen-san managed to successfully gain my cooperation, her cell phone began playing a ringtone—well, considering we were inside a hospital, the thing that received a call could be her PHS, her Personal Handy-phone System, instead. She was an onee-san that carried a large number, and various kinds, of telecommunications equipment.

“Hello? Yeah. Yeah. …Yeah.”

As she spoke on the phone, Gaen-san’s tone grew lower with every nod.

She was fundamentally an onee-san with a carefree style that didn’t suit seriousness at all, but it seemed that the radio waves had managed to deliver information that could make this onee-san stop smiling.

“I have some unfortunate news, Koyomin,” said Gaen-san after hanging up. “A third victim was discovered. Once again, a female student from Naoetsu High.”

004

If you asked what would be the most striking difference, or perhaps transformation, between the Araragi Koyomi that attended Naoetsu Private High School and the Araragi Koyomi that attended Manase National University, then the most appropriate answer would be the method he took to go to school. Though I'd fundamentally spent my high school days going to school on a bicycle and otherwise on foot, when it came to college, my hands instead gripped the steering wheel of a car.

It was a Volkswagen New Beetle. It was after grueling hours of hard work at my part-time job that I managed to procure a used one in good condition, and I'd further restored it on my own—well, saying so would make a really good impression, but actually, it was a new car that was gifted to me by my parents to celebrate my high school graduation.

I was really being pampered.

Surprisingly enough, the fact that I so easily accepted that amount of pampering without resisting as part of my rebellious phase could actually be considered the biggest difference, or transformation… But putting that aside, after exiting the hospital, I had Gaen-san sit in the back seat of that New Beetle and headed towards the scene of the oddity phenomenon.

If you were wondering why I had her sit in the back seat, it was because a child seat had been affixed to the passenger seat—my passenger seat was reserved for a certain young girl.

"By appearance, isn't Shinobu-chan about 8 years old…? Though it's not even comparable to her in her complete mode, isn't she old enough to not need a child seat?"

"That feeling of having a slightly older kid fit tightly in a child seat is what I like."

"Mm… That's something you'd be better off not telling other people, Koyomin. Even me, an onee-san who knows everything, would have preferred not knowing that."

As we lightly exchanged such witty banter, we headed for our destination, which, as expected, was the school road to Naoetsu High—it wasn't a place that was too far off from the hospital, so we arrived fairly quickly.

Because it was immediately following the discovery of the mummy, I had thought there would be a crowd of onlookers that had formed or police officers that had rushed in, but the area was surprisingly unpopular… Even if it wasn't the time when people were going to school, could a normal road like this really be so deserted?

It had made me a bit suspicious, but it turned out that that was a result of Gaen-san's arrangements.

A way of keeping people out through some sort of barrier, the domain of specialists.

It should have been obvious from the beginning, but I wasn't the only person at Gaen-san's beck and call at this case—Gaen-san's forte was working in a team, and it could be seen as a good outcome that the search party had already managed to discover another victim that had been mummified in the same way as the two that had already been carried to the hospital.

Already. And yet, too late.

It couldn't really be said that finding the third victim was a good thing.

"I know you have some anxiety around strangers, Koyomin, so I had the search party leave the area, too. So you can perform your on-site inspection at a leisurely pace," said Gaen-san.

I was happy about that concern, but my stranger anxiety wasn't that extreme.

Well, from Gaen-san's perspective, she probably didn't want to introduce a temporary member like me to her subordinates, or her "real cooperators"—I could understand that.

Since my education wasn't very good.

"Even so, there's a limit to putting up a paranormal barrier in a residential area in the middle of the day, so let's move quickly. I expect this to have a strong visual impact, Koyomin, so make sure you prepare yourself mentally for that."

And Gaen-san exited from the back seat of the New Beetle… After being shown not one, but two mummified high school girls in quick succession, why was she telling me this now? That was what I'd been wondering as I followed her out, but immediately, I realized the importance of that advice.

Where the third victim had been discovered was, to be precise, inside some kind of shack that I didn't really understand, built on the other side of the guardrail alongside the school road.

Well, it had probably originally been some sort of wooden structure made for some purpose, but now, it could only be seen as some unidentifiable pile of wood… Though I'd said she was inside, it could at best be seen as some sort of awning, and with this many gaps in the woodwork, it likely would be able to keep out neither rain nor wind.

And, at the dried-up mummy inside it, I was rendered speechless.

Comparing the mummy that had been made to wear a patient gown and been laid down on a hospital bed, with the mummy that

had been found in this mysterious incomprehensible shack wearing a high school uniform and collapsed on her side as if she had just dropped dead, the visual difference was striking.

Her shoes had fallen off, her clothes were a mess, and her bag had been thrown to the side.

Those details insistently nagged at me that this was the actual reality of things… Even if it was an oddity phenomenon, it was a reality that couldn't be passed off as fantasy.

There was no distinction between reality and delusion.

I was starting to regret having entered a domain that amateurs shouldn't lay a hand on—if it hadn't been Gaen-san that I'd made a promise with, I would probably have turned tail and run.

However, it wasn't good to have my whole body tremble in fear.

In fact, it almost made me want to put on airs like a specialist… I tried to act as composed as possible and began to approach the mummy.

"This one also looks like a failure from a vampire transformation," I said, saying something I'd just learned as if I'd known it all along.

As I'd done earlier in the hospital, I took her wrist to feel for a pulse—and then.

"Koyomin, look out!"

It was unusual to hear Gaen-san shout, but it was no wonder she did.

When I'd squatted down near the mummy, she sprang up as if a spring had been installed in her back, and reached her arm out towards me—no, not her arm, but her finger.

And not her finger, but her nail.

The mummy tried to scratch me—tried to tear me to shreds.

"Wh-whoa! Ah…"

Being held down by a high school girl could be considered exciting and pleasurable depending on the circumstances, but if the conditions were that it had to take place inside an ominous shack and the high school girl had to be a mummy, then it definitely wasn't something I could feel happy about—though I'd carelessly approached the mummy to take her pulse, I'd ended up grabbing both of her arms for different reasons—for self-defense reasons.

I was able to somehow defend myself against the girl's ten unpainted nails, but I couldn't do anything about her fangs—by grabbing both her wrists, that also had the effect of sealing my own arms from being used.

And if the mummy, while holding me down, tried to come and bite into me, it wasn't like I could try and bite into her to defend

myself.

Though I'd managed to perform all kinds of different kisses in my life, a mummified girl was way out of my strike zone—but ultimately, it was the work of a specialist that sealed the lips of the mummy that came onto me so passionately, and more importantly, the fangs that glinted within those lips.

Rather than sealing them, it was more like Gaen-san unleashed it—and what she unleashed was a cloth-like curtain that had covered the window of the shack.

And with that, the rays of the sun entered indoors, shining like a spotlight onto the mummy, and stopping her movements—like the opposite of a doll that moved using solar cells, as a result of bathing in the sun, the mummy ceased functioning.

As if her soul had been taken from her—if that was even possible—she collapsed onto me. That in itself was pretty frightening, but it seemed I'd just barely managed to escape from the predicament I'd carelessly stumbled into.

Although, considering that Gaen-san had cleaned up the predicament of this amateur college student with the most minimal of actions, perhaps it could hardly be considered a predicament… I see, even if the transformation had failed, the mummy was still a vampire, and was weak to sunlight.

Come to think of it, the hospital rooms where the mummies had been lying had also had the curtains open… And there were probably various other measures in place in that hospital room to seal the mummies' movements.

Even if they had no consciousness, even if the transformation had failed, a vampire was a vampire.

Even drawing near was dangerous.

"So… Sorry, Gaen-san. For acting on my own accord."

Rather than acting on my own accord, this was the result of me acting pretentious.

It was surprising how little I'd grown… Though I didn't know if getting my blood sucked by a mummy that had failed to become a vampire would turn me into a vampire, this had come dangerously close to eerily reproducing the events of that spring break when I was a 17-year-old.

Feeling ashamed of myself, I crawled out from underneath the mummy… But to that, Gaen-san said, "No, it's a great achievement, Koyomin," with some sort of consolation that I didn't understand.

An achievement?

"The name of this girl is Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan. A first-year of Naoetsu High. Because of how tall she is, I'd thought she was a third-year, but it seems kids these days are growing very well."

Without showing any more concern for me, Gaen-san had taken the bag that had been off to the side and looked through her student handbook and wallet and other belongings to obtain the victim's personal information—the first mummy had been a first-year, the second mummy had been a second-year, so the third would be a third-year… But there was no such clever progression.

"Um… Gaen-san. What do you mean by it being an achievement?"

"When Kuchimoto-chan went after you to try and scratch you, Koyomin, she dropped the set of flashcards that were *in her hand*, you see—you're not a high schooler anymore, Koyomin, but you remember what vocabulary flashcards are, right? The pieces of paper that you use to memorize English words."

Without turning to face me, she promptly tossed me those flashcards—of course I remembered. They were a huge help when I'd been taking entrance exams.

I caught them—it seemed Kuchimoto-chan wasn't particularly studious, as the flashcards were almost brand new. Among those flashcards, only the first one had been used, and what had been handwritten on the surface in red pen wasn't even an English word.

"B777Q".

"…? What is this?"

"I wonder. By the way, there was a pen that seemed like it could've written that among the writing materials right next to it—the cap of the pen wasn't even on. It was as if, when being attacked by a vampire, Kuchimoto-chan panicked and grabbed whatever she could to try and memorize that vocabulary word."

Gaen-san spoke carefreely as she fiddled with a smartphone with a strap on it, likely the high school girl's—unfortunately, it seemed a lock had been placed on it, which meant the contents of the phone could not be analyzed by even a specialist proficient with telecommunications equipment.

But anyway, the flashcards.

She tried to memorize vocabulary at that point… There's no way.

If anything…

"By the way, it seems Kuchimoto-san was an avid reader, which is admirable for this day and age. There was a work by Ellery Queen in her bag. You know, that Ellery Queen, famous for her 'Challenges to the Reader'."

And that Ellery Queen was famous for her dying messages as well—however, Kuchimoto-san had failed in a vampire transformation, so she was neither dead nor murdered, so the term dying message wasn't exactly accurate—but, "B777Q".

“It’s a code that would elate that mystery maniac Ougi-chan. Although it would be impossible to go and depend on her now.”

“Indeed. And she is still a student of Naoetsu High. She may even pull us further into the dark… At least during her stay of execution, I’d like to have her stay quiet.”

During her stay of execution, huh? It had a nice ring to it.

Although it didn’t particularly seem like she was going to stay quiet, there was no reason I should further stimulate her curiosity—although, if more students of Naoetsu High were going to become victims, then that dark girl would very likely start acting on her own.

I was at a loss. If I were still in high school, I’d be able to depend on Hanekawa without hesitation, but… No, wait.

“Gaen-san. Will you please give Koyomin a chance to redeem himself?”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“This dying message… Well, maybe we should be calling it a living message, but I think I have an idea about how to solve it. Please allow me to hold onto these flashcards for a bit.”

“If you’re going to say that much, then I don’t mind. Living message, huh? How clever. It’s common to make a joke that turns ‘dying message’ into ‘dining message’, but going for ‘living’ is fresh. And discovering that bit of evidence so early on is all thanks to Koyomin, after all—meanwhile, I’ll be in charge of *this*.”

Gaen-san had so disappointingly left the task to me that it felt less like she was giving me a chance to redeem myself and more like she’d discovered an even more important clue in her investigation—Gaen-san’s line of sight was still resting on Kuchimoto-san’s smartphone.

To be precise, what the specialist’s keen eyes were looking at was not the locked smartphone itself.

It was the item that was literally connected to it, the strap.

“…Is there something wrong with the strap, Gaen-san?”

To an amateur like me, it looked like nothing but an ordinary strap. It had two accessories in the shape of the alphabet letter “K” dangling from it—without even needing to think about it, they were most likely the initials for the name “KYOUMI KUCHIMOTO”.

Even if you locked your cell phone, if you left that personal information dangling out in the open, then it felt pretty meaningless…

“Of course, with just this, it would just be cute accessories that you could see anywhere. But if the second victim known as Honnou Aburi had a similar strap attached to her smartphone, wouldn’t the story change?”

“Eh? …A similar one?”

“Accessories with her initials. For Honnou Aburi-chan, it

would be ‘A H’… The lettering was the same. Of course, it could just be a coincidence. It could be a simple trend that this onee-san past her prime is unaware of.”

The smartphone of the first victim, Harimaze-chan, wasn’t decorated with any accessories at all, too—said Gaen-san, making a prudent excuse, before continuing with a “However”.

“However, if the victims have something in common besides just being female students of Naoetsu High—there’s a possibility that that missing link can tie back to the identity of that unidentifiable vampire as well.”

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Gaen-san called an ambulance to transport the third mummy, Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan, to Naoetsu General Hospital, as the previous two mummies had been. And afterwards, I drove my New Beetle and headed for Manase University.

It wasn't anything like the admirable attitude of a college student to at least attend his afternoon lectures—it was to follow up on the idea I'd had with regards to solving the living message that had been left.

Conveniently, the 5th period course for today was the cryptography course I'd been thinking of—and undoubtedly, Meniko was sure to attend.

Hamukai Meniko.

She was a new friend I'd made in college. Considering she'd become a friend of mine, she was as usual a bit of an oddball, but what was important was that Hamukai Meniko was my first friend in a while to be completely unrelated to monstrous apparitions or evil spirits, urban legends or oddity stories—to be honest, just this made enrolling in university worthwhile.

I was glad I worked so hard to study.

Anyway, when I arrived at Manase University and entered the cryptography lecture hall in a bit of a late fashion, as usual, there was some good news and bad news.

The bad news: class had been canceled.

This was something that happened in college, after all.

However, the good news—there was a single person sitting in the lecture hall, neither reading a book nor playing with her smartphone nor draped over her desk asleep. And the one that was sitting while staring vacantly off into space was the student I was looking for.

"Yo, Meniko."

"Ah. Araragi-chan. *Hola.* Class is canceled, you know?"

"*Hola.* Seems like it, huh. But then, what are you even doing here?"

"Because I planned on spending my time here—I guess?"

As if she was wondering for the first time as to why she was sitting in a lecture hall for a canceled class, she responded as if she were playing dumb.

Thinking about it, it had been something like this when I first spoke to her, too—I'd come late to a class that had gotten canceled, and I'd ended up meeting Meniko, who was sitting in the classroom not doing anything.

In short, Meniko was decidedly bad at making changes to a schedule that she'd decided upon—even if a class was canceled, if she decided that she was going to spend that hour in that classroom, she'd move according to that schedule.

She was definitely an oddball. Although not as odd as I was.

But it was thanks to that that I could find her like this—because her personality was like this, it was pretty difficult to make plans over text as a result.

"There's something I want you to take a look at."

Finding it fortunate that the classroom had no one else in it, I took a seat next to Meniko and got straight to the point.

"All riiight. I'll look at anythiiing. If it's a request from Araragi-chaaan."

"It's about this flashcard."

Since it was my first friend in a while with no involvement with oddities, I took special care not to get Meniko tangled up in my various oddity-related affairs, as I'd done with Oikura, while trying to maintain friendly relations with her, but in this case, it probably wouldn't be a problem—or rather, there were certainly many kinds of people in college, and among them, a female college student like this, with such a leisurely atmosphere, that it almost seemed like she was living in a different flow of time, and her hobby was deciphering codes, even when she wasn't a mystery maniac—she was quite an eccentric one.

She'd enrolled as a mathematics student as a result of her code maniac growing intense, and she was a promising ray of light among the first-years, valued highly by even the professor in charge of this cryptography course, although it had been canceled today.

And she was aiming to get a job in the police department's cyber security division or something… So, if I couldn't rely on Hanekawa or Ougi-chan, then I couldn't think of anyone else better than Meniko to ask for help—of course, I didn't reveal the fact that this was, not a dying message, but a living message left behind by a mummy that had failed to become a vampire.

I absolutely wouldn't introduce her to Gaen-san, either.

If I wanted to protect my precious friendships, I had to draw the line there.

"'B777Q'… Hmm?"

It seemed she'd been intrigued by it. It was hard to tell by her facial expression, but fundamentally, if there was something Meniko didn't find interesting, she'd ignore it as if she didn't even see it.

If you took in the fact that she'd so carelessly promised to "look at anything", then her words didn't match up with her actions at all, so it was good that I got her to look at it.

“Flashcards, huuuh? How nostalgiiic. Hm? There’s something written on the back, too.”

“Huh? The back?”

When I flipped through the cards back in that shack, I had judged that the rest of them had been completely blank, but right, since they were flashcards, there was a space to write on the back, as well…

I definitely wasn’t cut out for the role of a detective.

There were too many things I overlooked.

Nonetheless, when I inspected both sides of the flashcards dropped by Kuchimoto-san that I’d thought to be blank, both the fronts and the backs of almost all of them turned out to blank after all, without anything strange appearing—however, as Meniko had pointed out, on the other side of the very first card with “B777Q” written on it, the numbers “231” had been written in a manner even messier than on the front—“231”?

“B777Q” and “231”?

Absolutely nothing seemed to click for me—but what about the code maniac?

“Yeah. I have no idea.”

“So you have no idea, either?”

“Yep. I have no idea. Why Araragi-chan, who’s so much smarter than me, couldn’t solve such an easy code like this—I have no idea.”

So basically, did that mean she solved it?

I told Meniko that I could treat her to tea or something as thanks, but she politely declined, saying she had the next lecture to attend—well, that was the case for me as well, but unlike Meniko, I was flexible. The fact that I was not in the least reluctant to skip out on lectures was the same as in my high school days.

And, more simply, I had no time to waste.

Because it was an oddity phenomenon that involved a vampire, I needed to do as much as I could before the sun set—it's good to have a shelter against every storm.

After all, I'd even nearly been torn to shreds by mummies standing on the boundary line of life and death, unclear whether they were living or dead.

If I was going to have to confront the vampire itself—well, since I was under Gaen-san's management, it probably wouldn't develop into a battle, but it would still be better if I could resolve things before Kagenui-san arrived.

As such, I followed my navigation and traveled from Manase University to the Naoetsu General Hospital using the shortest paths possible. After arriving, I called the number of Gaen-san's PHS that I'd gotten from her when we'd parted ways, and had her tell me where Kuchimoto-chan's hospital room was—I'd foolishly wondered if, now that a third victim had appeared, it would be better to put them all in one large room for the sake of convenience, but it seemed Gaen-san wanted to keep them separate.

Well, if those related to the female students (mainly their families) ended up sharing strange information, it could cause a huge uproar—it was probably better to deal with each one of them as its own separate case, with "cause unknown", under the pretense of confidentiality, so as to keep this terrifying supernatural phenomenon behind closed doors and not cause a panic.

Of course, there had to be limits to that, but…

"Hey, Koyomin. You got back pretty quick, didn'tcha?"

Next to Kuchimoto-san, who'd been changed into a patient gown and laid on the bed like the two before her, Gaen-san, who was placing some sort of charm (vampire-sealing?), turned to look at me.

"Did you solve the code? I'd be happy if you said you did. Something a little inconvenient happened on my end, so I'd love to hear some good news."

"Huh. It's pretty unusual for something inconvenient to happen for you while I wasn't there."

"Totally."

Though she wouldn't offer any details, it seemed something truly inconvenient had indeed happened—although, unfortunately, I hadn't been able to return with good news that could make up for that.

Thanks to Meniko, the code I'd been assigned had indeed been solved, but that didn't change the fact that I had no idea what it meant—of course, this was just an amateur's judgment.

Perhaps, if I presented Meniko's solution (decryption) to Gaen-san, a specialist, it would be something immediately recognizable for her.

"My friend, who's planning on majoring in cryptography, solved it in ten seconds. It was actually a bit too quick to be satisfying, but it was a code that a high schooler thought of, after all."

But it wasn't a code that couldn't be solved.

I put the flashcards on the shelf by the bed and tried to make my explanation brief.

"'B777Q'. If we take it apart, it's made up of a 'B' and a 'Q' with three sevens in between them, but what characteristics do the 'B' and 'Q' have in common?—although, I shouldn't need to start showing off like that in front of you, Gaen-san."

"No, it's fun. Keep going like that."

Even if you encouraged me…

Well, I was happy that she was going along with my self-redemption, now that I noticed it. It seemed she had some good points, when I actually could speak to her like this.

"Well, to sum it up, for the capital letters 'B' and 'Q' that look completely different when written in uppercase, they end up becoming the same shape, but rotated, when written in lowercase as 'b' and 'q'—and, if we think of them having the same shape, then there's a pair of Arabic numerals that also have the same shape."

"That's true. I'm well-aware of it from playing *Uno*."

"Um, it doesn't matter whether you know about it from playing *Uno* or not."

It was "6" and "9".

And, as you can see, "6" and "9" more or less had the same shape as "b" and "q"—in other words, after substituting them, we could come up with the equation that "B777Q" equals "67779".

"B777Q" = "67779".

"Oho. I see, I'm following you so far. But what does the number '67779' mean exactly? Do you have an interpretation for that?"

"Though she's aspiring to major in cryptography, that friend, like me, is a mathematics student, so when she sees a number lined up like this, she's the kind of person that thinks of prime factorization

first, you see."

"What an annoying kind of person."

"Indeed. However, without even needing to do prime factorization, it should be clear as day that we can split '67779' into three prime numbers. That is, '67/7/79'."

"How is that even clear as day? Something like that is fainter than looking at a ghost."

Gaen-san shrugged her shoulders as if she was astounded.

Even an onee-san that knew everything couldn't know this as thoroughly as a code maniac and a prime number maniac could.

"So? How do you interpret '67/7/79' next?"

Of course, without even needing me to explain what prime numbers were, Gaen-san sought out the next step of the decryption—she was certainly good at using people.

"Well, we had a step where we converted the alphabet into Arabic numerals, right? So it's an orthodox method of doing the opposite now and turning the Arabic numerals back to letters of the alphabet."

"Hm… So is it 'S/D/V'?"

She was sharp.

Yes… "67" was the 19th prime number when you counted from "2". Similarly, "7" was the 4th prime number, and "79" was the 22nd prime number.

"67/7/79" = "S/D/V".

"If she managed to figure that out in ten seconds, then I can't look down on college students these days, huh. Well, I don't have any complaints so far, but I still don't understand what 'S/D/V' is supposed to mean. You still have more, right?"

"Yes… I'm sure you probably realized this, Gaen-san, but for every piece of a flashcard, there's always a backside… In the same handwriting as the front side, the numbers '231' were written."

"I hadn't realized it, though. Don't overestimate this onee-san too much, because I'd hate to disappoint you youngsters. '231'? Since it's obviously divisible by '3', it's naturally not a prime number. Although, among the titles of Maurice Leblanc's works, I think there was something like '313'."

"Since it had been specifically written on the back side, we should take this not as another code, but as a sub-key to use as a hint… That is, it could be pointing out the order."

"The order? So, we should take the three letters pointed at by the code on the front side, and put them in the order of '2-3-1', like an anagram? So basically, 'S/D/V' becomes 'D/V/S'…"

"S/D/V" = "D/V/S".

It was likely that, in order to give off an air of perfection, the

code had been rearranged to show the three sevens, “777”, and this was an operation to put everything back.

Even I thought that “B777Q” looked better than “77QB7”.

Putting it all together…

“B777Q” = “b777q” = “67779” = “67/7/79” = “S/D/V” = “D/V/S”.

That was it—I was happy that I was being overestimated with her saying “Araragi-chan, who’s so much smarter than me”, but really, Meniko, arriving at something like this was impossible for me.

However, for a code maniac like Meniko, her decryption only went as far as this—just because “S/D/V” was “D/V/S”, it still didn’t change the fact that it was completely meaningless.

We could only decipher up to here for now.

However, if Gaen-san continued to say, “I still don’t understand. You still have more, right?”, then I’d have to throw my hands up—but the onee-san that knew everything stayed silent.

“……”

Without pressing further, and without even stating her own thoughts, she put a hand to her mouth, quietly behaving as if she were deep in thought.

Was there an interpretation that a specialist could make, as I had hoped? Could “D/V/S” be some sort of specialized term used by specialists… For example, something like “Dracula vampire soulless”…

But, as if chiding me for thinking something so stupid, Gaen-san said, “This is indeed an abbreviation, but these are initials, Koyomin. For example—the initials of a name like, ‘Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster’.”

“D/V/S” = “DEATHTOPIA VIRTUOSO SUICIDEMASTER”.

It was an awfully specific name to use just as an example, but it seemed as Gaen-san had no intention of explaining any further, as she said, “Thanks, Koyomin. It seems like we might have something to go off of now,” cutting short the conversation with her gratitude. “Give your friend my thanks, as well.”

“Ah, yes…”

If the leader wrapped it up like this with that much force, I couldn’t exactly go against it… Well, the fact that Gaen-san wasn’t explaining it could mean that it was better off for me not to know. At least, for now…

In any case, for now we could put aside the deciphering of the living message that the third mummy, Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan, left behind… As for me, I was more curious about Gaen-san’s gloomy face that she’d shown when I entered the room.

Something inconvenient happened. That was what she’d said.

That’s why she wanted some good news.

Even though she had said thanks, it didn’t necessarily dispel the gloom from Gaen-san’s expression, so I wondered if what I had brought was not good news but bad news. However, I couldn’t just pretend to ignore whatever inconvenient thing happened while I’d been out.

“It might have been a bit of an exaggeration to call it inconvenient. Or rather, if it’s like this, then I should say I’m glad I brought you in in advance, Koyomin… In a way, this is fate. Well, because of the cell phone straps, I was wondering if there was another point in common between the victims aside from just them attending the same school, so I did a little invasion of the girls’ privacy.”

“When you put it like that, it makes it really hard to understand what exactly you’re a specialist of, Gaen-san.”

“As a result, I uncovered a completely unforeseen fact. All three of them were a part of the same club.”

“The same club?”

Ah, then even if they were in different years, it would still make sense for them to be connected by having the same kind of strap… Although, I’d never been a part of a club, so I’d hardly associated with anyone who wasn’t in my year.

Then, it wasn’t just Kuchimoto-chan and Honnou-chan, but even the first mummy, Harimaze-chan, that were connected by a common missing link—but what was inconvenient about that?

Wasn’t that a good thing?

It seemed much more concrete than the information I’d gone

all the way to my college to bother a friend for, and it seemed like a much better clue that would take us a step closer to the resolution of the incident…

"And that club happens to be the girls' basketball team."

"Ah."

I understood. I understood very well.

Because, even though Gaen-san had almost nothing to be afraid of, specializing in all sorts of monstrous apparitions, she happened to have a single weakness, an organization that reminded her of her older sister… The Naoetsu High girls' basketball team.

Gaen Tooe.

That was the name of Gaen-san's sister, the onee-san's sister, and that onee-san's sister's daughter's name was Kanbaru Suruga—currently a third-year high school girl at Naoetsu High, and the former captain of the girls' basketball team.

She was one of the few juniors I'd interacted with—more precisely, she was the junior of my girlfriend, but, anyway, the keyword "mummy" was something that really had a bad affinity with Kanbaru.

And even if that weren't the case, the Naoetsu High girls' basketball team was rather unique… It was on quite a different level for a club that was in that uptight university-focused school.

Even if there were no oddities, it was still an odd organization.

If all three victims were members of the girls' basketball team, then it seemed impossible to just pass off as a coincidence… Although it was also dangerous to assume that that was the source of the incident.

Though I didn't remember when, a specialist had once said this.

Oddities have their own appropriate reasons—indeed.

Even the vampire that sucked out my blood during my spring break as a 17-year-old had inevitably had her own reason for doing so.

And if it happened that this case was also inevitable…

"We'd have to keep digging into it, right? Um, so basically… It would be better if I was the one to do that, right?"

"Right. I shouldn't get any more involved with Suruga, after all."

That was probably what she'd meant by when she said she was glad she'd brought me in in advance… Once before, during an incident that wasn't just oddity-related, but also vampire-related, Gaen-san had needed to make use of Kanbaru's "left arm", and had operated under a fake name to do so.

She'd needed to do that much, because it was that taboo for her to step on her sister's shadow.

Though she was someone that was fuzzier than Oshino, she was strict about at least that much.

"Not to mention, Suruga has lost her 'left arm' now—or should we say she 'recovered' it? Really, Kaiki did something so unnecessary. Because of that, I lost another one of my successors."

"…Thinking about what happened before, I feel the same way in not wanting to get her involved. But, well."

I looked towards the bed… The third girl to be mummified, Kuchimoto Kyoumi.

After seeing her dried-up form once again, I knew I couldn't say that.

"In the first place, since it's been a while since Kanbaru retired from the basketball team, it could be doubtful whether or not she has any useful information."

"Even so, I'd like you to do it. Since she's sociable like her mother, there's no way she wouldn't know even a single one of her juniors—if possible, I'd like to get a list of all the club's members."

"Understood."

And, though I accepted it, I couldn't reject the feelings of reluctance that followed. Because no matter how much caution I took, if I came to her with a weird approach, then Kanbaru would be sure to recklessly poke her nose into these affairs… At the very least, I didn't want a repeat of the events of the previous incident.

I checked the watch on my right wrist, confirming that it was currently in the middle of 6th period at the high school—at this rate, it should be possible to meet up with Kanbaru before the sun set.

Unlike Meniko, since Kanbaru was preparing for entrance exams, it was probably better to set things up over text beforehand… Or should I just handle everything by calling her? Although, considering the circumstances, I did want to meet up and talk to her directly…

"Also, I may as well let you know what I've ascertained after going through her belongings, Koyomin. From the on-site inspection, I had come to the conclusion that this girl had to have been attacked by the vampire this morning, but it turns out that she'd become a victim as early as dawn of yesterday."

"Yesterday? Um, then… She was the third person to be discovered, but Kuchimoto-san was actually the second victim?"

"Yep. That's how it is. She'd been missing for almost an entire day—that's what I learned after contacting her family. Putting it all together, Naoetsu High first-year Harimaze Kie-chan was attacked in the evening of the day before yesterday—and, before daybreak, the vampire attacked another Naoetsu High first-year, Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan. It's still unclear whether the vampire sucked her blood in that

shack or the vampire sucked her blood and then moved her to that shack, but regardless, it was done in the night—as a vampire does, it took a break during the day after the sun rose, and when night fell again, it bit into the neck of the Naoetsu High second-year, Honnou Aburi-chan, in her own home."

The permutation had changed, but, if anything, it broke down the hypothesis, high-paced as it was, that one victim was formed per day—by now, it wasn't exactly good news to hear.

This vampire was quite a glutton.

"Speaking of which, didn't vampires need permission to enter the houses or rooms of others? The second… that is, the third victim, Honnou-chan—wasn't she discovered in the futon of her own room?"

"There are variations to that idea, so I can only say that it depends on the circumstances. There are times when that's the case, and there are times when it isn't—however, if the culprit was some extremely handsome man with a well-proportioned body and an annual income of 500 million yen, like Shishirui Seishirou, then there's probably no high school girl that would not let someone like him enter their room."

Well, I wasn't sure about Shishirui Seishirou's annual income being 500 million yen, but, well, that was indeed a truth, or perhaps divine providence… It was also possible that, as was conjectured with Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan's case, the unidentified vampire sucked the blood of the girl in an alleyway, turned her into a mummy, and then carried her into her room after that… Although I had no idea why it would do something like that.

"Of course, there might be even more victims, so I'll keep an eye out in this town for more dried-up mummies, not just limited to the female students of Naoetsu High—really, it feels more like searching for an ancient civilization, instead of just an oddity story. It's fortunate for now that the search range is just within this town, but depending on the situation, we may need to expand it even further."

"…Would it help if we asked Hachikuji for assistance?"

If we were talking about this town, then that lost child had become this town's god, so she'd probably be aware of troubles that were occurring in town… It was possible that she knew something.

"Hmm. I wonder about that. There's certainly a high possibility for that, but since she's become a god, that means by now that she's firmly on the side of the oddities."

"I see."

I wouldn't exactly be able to deal with depending on my old friend and putting her in a dilemma between humans and oddities.

Even gods had their own positions to keep in mind—if I

appealed to her using my friendship and ended up toppling her from the seat of a god, that lost child could end up falling straight to hell without getting lost on the way.

After all, the road to the Kitashirahebi Shrine had become a throughway to hell.

And that was something that—well, it didn't really pain me to say it.

"Well, in any case, I'll set up plans to meet up with Kanbaru for now. And while I'm at it, I'll go and clean up her room really quickly."

"That's a pretty incredible task to just do while you're at it. My niece is really causing trouble for you."

Although she wasn't as bad as you.

Well, I suppose it ran in the family.

"What will you do now, Gaen-san?"

"Though I feel bad because you and the search party are all working hard, I'm going to borrow an open bed in the hospital and take a nap—since I'm going to have to be active at night. No matter how young I dress myself up as, at this age, pulling an all-nighter is rough."

Well, that made sense.

As long as vampires were nocturnal, you'd have no choice but to adjust your biological clock to deal with their movements—even sleeping was part of the job.

Incidentally, a benefit of my aftereffects was that I didn't need to plan my sleep schedule like Gaen-san—it didn't put too much strain on me if I lost one or two nights of sleep. My vampire constitution had been modestly useful during my exam period.

"Oh yeah, by the way, Gaen-san. What should I tell Shinobu about this case? There's no doubt she'll wake up once night falls, after all."

Like with Kanbaru, during the case of Shishirui Seishirou, Oshino Shinobu had also been put to work, but I couldn't say that that weak-minded little girl had been totally useful.

If anything, she'd totally gotten in our way.

Well, I could sympathize with her situation, so I couldn't one-sidedly criticize her for her actions, and I had no intention of doing so, but if this was going to revive her feelings of remorse from that time, then perhaps we'd be better off excluding her from this case from the beginning.

After being sealed in my shadow, she had become not quite a half-vampire and more of a half-slave, but she wasn't the kind of person that worked the way I wanted her to.

"After all, since they're both vampires, it could end up being

someone she knows. That in itself would put her in a dilemma."

"For sure. It could be someone she knows. That would put her in a dilemma," repeated Gaen-san, nodding suggestively. "Well, we can think about that while she's sleeping. For now, focus on getting as much information as you can before tonight."

"Understood."

008

As I stepped on the accelerator on the way to Kanbaru's house, I pondered the possibility that the note that had been jotted down on that flashcard was not actually a living message.

"B777Q" = "D/V/S".

It seemed Gaen-san had come up with some sort of hypothesis, and I believed Meniko's decryption had been right—however, for a code left behind just before the victim was transformed into a mummy, I felt that it was a little *too* elaborate.

Because, even if the cryptography was correct, this wasn't a mystery novel… Perhaps Ougi-chan would be convinced by it, but if you were being attacked by a vampire, or some other bad guy, would you really have the luxury of considering what the 22nd prime number was, or thinking that putting the three sevens together as "777" looked better?

No matter how much of a hard worker she was at school…

To be honest, even for me, who I could only recognize as having made it into college through his math skills alone, counting the prime numbers wasn't something I could easily do in my head, especially when I was driving like this… And if I were in a panic from being attacked, I was sure it would be close to impossible.

Well, it would be possible if it were Hanekawa, or even Meniko… Perhaps we could leave open the possibility that Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan was one of those rarely seen child prodigies, but looking at those blank flashcards, it was hard to see her as anything but a studious honors student…

Especially if she was a member of the girls' basketball team known for its intense training… It was the same for Kanbaru, but that club had a system where you wouldn't be able to keep up if you didn't do your duties.

In that case, perhaps it wasn't a living message, or even a dying message—wasn't it more appropriate to deduce that this was actually the "signature" of the "culprit" vampire?

Signature, a declaration of crime, a proclamation of war, a self-expression.

It didn't matter what you called it, but it supported the theory of it being "initials" like Gaen-san mentioned briefly, or maybe even carelessly—it wasn't that the victim left behind the initials of the "culprit", but that the "culprit" left behind their own initials in the hands of the victim?

As if—making themselves known.

…If that was the case, the first (for now) victim, Harimaze Kie-

chan, or the second (to be discovered) victim, Honnou Aburi-chan, could have something hidden among their personal belongings that involved such a self-inflated signature.

Should I let Gaen-san know about that? No, if it was a possibility on a level that I could come up with, then there was no way that Gaen-san didn't already hit upon it… And even if she hadn't, it wasn't a hypothesis worth waking her up, when she was trying to recharge herself for the coming night.

For now, I would focus on my own duty.

And as I pondered, the New Beetle arrived at the Japanese mansion where Kanbaru lived… I hadn't completely gotten free of the appeal of bicycles, but in the end, cars were on a completely different level in terms of mobility—I barely had the time to guess at deductions while I was traveling.

As if working as parking attendants, my junior stood outside the open gates, still in uniform on the way back from school—but, oh? It wasn't just one junior that was there.

Next to Kanbaru stood another female student, naturally wearing a Naoetsu High uniform as well—by the color of her necktie, she was a third-year, but who was she?

"Let me introduce you, Araragi-senpai. This is my friend from when I was in the basketball team, Higasa. After I retired, she took over as captain."

In a somewhat rushed greeting, Kanbaru introduced her classmate and friend to me when I left my car—her friend, who had been the captain of the girls' basketball team until very recently. I see, so when I let her know about the general idea of my business over the phone, she'd made some arrangements.

What a capable junior. I was unworthy of her.

"It's nice to meet you, Araragi-senpai. My name is Higasa Seiu. I've heard rumors about you for some time now."

"Haha. I'm sure they weren't any good rumors, right?"

"Ahahahahahahahahaha."

I was laughed at in an almost unnatural way. It seemed they weren't good rumors.

"Come inside, Araragi-senpai. No point in standing around here. Grandpa and Grandma are out on a trip, so they'll be away until the day after tomorrow, but I can at least make tea for you."

"Eh. Um, but, your room…"

"It's fiiine. I already know about it."

Though I'd been in a panic, Higasa-chan spoke up as if in total understanding—it seemed my capable junior had a capable friend. I felt a bit of relief at learning that Kanbaru had a friend among her peers that could tolerate such a chaotic room—but, anyway, I didn't

want to overstay my welcome.

The problem in Kanbaru's left arm had been resolved, and it seemed she was lively and in high spirits, so let's quickly finish up my business here and take my leave—before she found out that I was playing around with her aunt.

"Here, have some tea, Araragi-senpai. I haven't put anything suspicious in it, so drink up without any worries."

"You don't need to add that remark!"

"Ahahahahahahahahaha."

Perhaps she was just someone who simply got drunk on laughter, but it seemed Higasa-chan didn't particularly mind sitting with and relaxing with a senior she'd just met, in this room whose mess seemed almost like a lie—as expected of Kanbaru's friend, she sure was easy-going.

"No, no, I'm actually very shy. Unlike Ruga, who's so boorish."

Although she certainly didn't seem like it.

Also, so Kanbaru was called "Ruga" by her friends…

For a moment, I'd been about to lean into the description of my cute junior as boorish, but in terms of our relationships, Higasa-chan was much closer to Kanbaru than I was, so it would be weird to condemn her evaluation.

"However, Araragi-senpai, you feel like someone I've known for a long time, so it doesn't really feel like we've just met for the first time."

"Really, what kind of rumors are floating around about me…?"

She was speaking as if I was someone like Lieutenant Columbo.

"You were the only delinquent among Naoetsu High's graduates, after all."

So that wasn't just Hanekawa's own misunderstanding?

Aw man.

"Although, just from hearing the rumors, it makes me quiver with fear. I'm so awestruck, so please forgive me if I end up being discourteous in any way out of my nervousness. Oh yeah, and I want to brag to all my friends, so could I please have your number?"

She didn't even hesitate.

Attached to the cell phone that was cheekily yet amiably presented to me was a strap with the letters "S H" as accessories… Hmm, it seemed that she had still left it on even after retiring.

What about Kanbaru?

Ah, that's right, her getting a cell phone was something that happened after she met me—it ended up being like that.

"So… About the girls' basketball team."

"Yes, yes. I have the data prepared right here."

From her school bag, Higasa-chan deftly pulled out a file that

looked rather thick—it looked almost like a class's attendance record, but considering the context, it was most likely a register for the club.

"Since I joined the club, it's always been Higasa that kept records of all our activities, you see. If it were me, I wouldn't have even thought to make a list like that, and even if I did, I probably would have lost it somewhere," said Kanbaru.

Indeed, seeing the wretched state of this room that I had cleaned just the other day, I could see that she wasn't just being modest to praise her friend.

Though Higasa-chan had retired after she'd become a third-year, she'd still been present during the recruitment for the club in April, as she seemed to be completely aware of the affairs of the current second-years and the current first-years—however, when I reflexively reached out, she suddenly raised her hands in a *banzai* and kept the register out of my reach.

Like a basketball player trying to prevent a steal—or not.

"What is it? Nobody said, 'put your hands up!', Higasa-chan."

"Yeah. We-ell, Araragi-senpai. I shouldn't even need to say this, but this *is* the personal information of a hundred high school girls, after all," said Higasa-chan with a smile, holding the register in the air.

A hundred?

I turned to Kanbaru—and she nodded.

Wow, so the girls' basketball team had a hundred members.

A hundred members just from the first- and second-years… So were there at least fifty from each year? With a concrete number being defined, it put me at even more of a loss than when we had hypothesized an unspecified large number of victims.

Gaen-san had said something like "two out of a hundred", but that should have been just an example…

Well, for a sports club that competed on a national level, it could even be considered a fewer number of people than usual…

"To be exact, it's not fifty from each year. There are 76 second-years and 24 first-years, for a total of one hundred," said Higasa-chan. "So, even if this was something I made personally, if word got out that I leaked something like this, it wouldn't exactly end well for me."

"Right. Yeah, that's true."

I couldn't do anything but agree—I knew that, as someone who'd already graduated, and as someone who'd been part of the go-home club with absolutely no relation to the girls' basketball team, it was from the beginning a rather selfish request to ask for a hundred girls' worth of names, addresses, and contact information.

"Yes. If that were to happen, my blood would be spilled."

She was probably joking, but just today I'd laid eyes on three

mummies with the blood sucked completely out of them, so I couldn't exactly go, "Ahahahahahahahahaha".

"Yes. It's not something to laugh about. It's not just their names and addresses and contact information—it even has their height and weight and three sizes and whether or not they have a partner."

"I'm sorry to take up more of your time, but Higasa-chan, would you mind blacking out those parts for me?"

"Even though it wouldn't end well for me, if I handed these records over to that Araragi-senpai infamous for being a *hentai*…"

"Infamous for being a *hentai*?"

"No. I said Araragi-*hentai*, infamous for being a senpai."

If that was what you said, that sounded even more cruel.

Should I go to Naoetsu High starting now to try and fix my bad reputation?

"Higasa. Being a *hentai* is my territory. And don't act all buddy-buddy and have fun with Araragi-senpai."

From off to the side, "Ruga" demonstrated the narrowness of her dignity.

Really, I couldn't feel any star power from her at all… And yet, they still called her the legendary ace of the basketball team.

However, if her intention was to protect the personal information of her members as an ex-captain, then Higasa-chan surely would not have even bothered to bring the register to this mansion on Kanbaru's request in the first place.

"I see. Understood, Higasa-chan. If I want to get that register, then you're saying I have to defeat you in a game of street basketball, right?"

"Um, no, that's not what I'm saying."

So it wasn't that? But I'd already taken off my jacket.

"Rather than that, the reason I'm risking becoming a bloody mess to lend you this top-secret register, Araragi-senpai, is in the hopes that maybe you'll be able to break down the current state of the Naoetsu High girls' basketball team."

"…? The current state of the club?"

"Higasa. If you ask that much from Araragi-*hentai*…"

While I was tilting my head at the rather unsettling wording, Kanbaru rebuked her friend—you're also calling me Araragi-*hentai*, aren't you.

You absolutely can't lend out the personal information of a hundred high school girls to someone like that!

"No, no. Even you feel some responsibility for it, though, don't you, Ruga? For the girlsbas right now. Perhaps even more than me."

"That's… Ah, Araragi-hentai. 'Girlsbas' is just a shortened form

of ‘girls’ basketball team’, and, most assuredly, does not mean the girls’ bath.”

“Could it actually be you that’s spreading around my bad reputation, Kanbaru-kouhai?”

In any case, it seemed that, even between the two ex-captains, they didn’t share the same opinion. And hearing that much, I wasn’t the kind of Araragi-*hentai* that would back down so easily.

Not to mention, if there was some sort of trouble in the girls’ basketball team right now, then, surprisingly enough, it could have some connection to the cause of the current serial mummification incident.

“Let me know what’s going on. After all, I didn’t come here to ask for help without doing anything in return. If there’s something bothering you, I’ll do my best to help.”

“I’m very happy you feel that way, but it’s enough to have you come over to clean my room every week or so, Araragi-senpai.”

“Isn’t that actually more than enough, Ruga…?” said Higasa-chan, scowling as if saying, don’t say things that will make it harder for me to rely on Araragi-senpai. She then turned to me and said, “It’s kinda in big trouble, the girlsbas after we retired,” in an informal tone.

Really, what part of you was shy?

“It’s not really a matter of there being any specific reason, but the atmosphere feels awful… When I visited the gym to try and be senpai-like and have them let off some exam stress, it almost felt like I put more stress on them instead.”

Perhaps it was because of that that this girl was joking around in order to not make the atmosphere around her heavy as well—if so, she had a pretty good personality… Kanbaru had been acting as if she was embarrassed by her friend’s behavior, but really, what you should be ashamed of is the state this room is in.

“Does it have to do with them getting weaker? Like, they fell out of the golden age that had the two of you in it.”

I probably should have chosen my words better for that, but as someone with a small vocabulary, I couldn’t think of another way to express it—they got weaker.

Although, well, that could just be inevitable, in a sense.

In a sense, Kanbaru was just too extraordinary.

To be even called a superstar, she was a student that was far more out-of-place than I was at Naoetsu High, a private school that was university-focused…

“That’s true. Since I just worked really hard at my studies to chase after Senjougahara-senpai who I yearned for so much.”

“Incidentally, I’m a sports-minded girl who can study without

even needing to work hard at it."

Higasa-chan boastfully puffed out her chest, still keeping both her arms raised.

Well, there were those sorts of people, too.

"But I don't think it's because they got weaker. If anything, I'd say that would be even better for them… But, the atmosphere turned bad."

"The atmosphere—"

"The girls' basketball team stopped being a club that's bright and fun with a sense of solidarity," explained Kanbaru, almost unwillingly, in a way that was very much unlike her. "They lost their sense of solidarity—and all that was left was a sense of collective responsibility. And, to be specific…"

Kanbaru Suruga paused, then continued.

"Out of the hundred members listed in that register, five of them have gone missing."

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According to Higasa-chan, saying that they'd "gone missing" was a bit of an exaggerated take from my rash junior, but to sum it up, among the first- and second-years, there were five members who couldn't be contacted.

Surprisingly enough, I was already familiar with three out of the five names they gave—although it wasn't that surprising.

Harimaze Kie. Honnou Aburi. Kuchimoto Kyoumi.

I could understand up to that point.

Thanks to Gaen-san's deft manipulation of information, and perhaps even an embargo of information, the various mummified girls were being treated as having a "strange disease", so their matters weren't publicized—as such, the three of them were seen from the outside as absent for some vague reason, the actual circumstances imperceptible.

"Gone missing".

Up to that point, it had all been pre-established, so it wasn't worth getting shocked or taken aback—the problem would be the fact that *two more names* were included in the group of "missing" girls.

It was a fact that I didn't want to face.

It was a bit premature to assume that both of them had already fallen victim to a vampire, but even if that wasn't the case, five students going "missing" was more than enough to be a huge incident, wasn't it?-although, that was just what I thought as someone who'd already graduated, but, thinking back to when I'd still been enrolled, I had to conclude that that wasn't necessarily true.

I'd already mentioned that I'd skipped class in high school a lot, but it wouldn't exactly be right to say that, at this university-focused school where people "going missing" was rare, everyone but me was an honors student.

If you wondered what happened to the students that couldn't keep up in class, that weren't suited to the school tradition of having the top standard score, that ended up falling behind… Well, in short, you'd say they—"went away".

They'd transfer, or they'd drop out.

Or, like Oikura Sodachi, they'd shut themselves in their own home—they "went away".

What Higasa-chan had said was certainly right, and a "delinquent that graduated from Naoetsu High" like me was certainly rare.

It had to be an exaggeration to say that I was the "only" one, but most of them didn't make it to graduation.

They'd go away—they'd disappear.

As if they'd never been there in the first place—so, at Naoetsu High, becoming "unable to see" a student was not an especially unusual affair.

What the school was turning a blind eye to was not the students that fell behind themselves, but the idea that the school even had students that fell behind to begin with. That was the reality—the real problem.

Well, it wasn't just Naoetsu High. All private schools probably wanted to avoid scandals like that…

But, in terms of the trouble occurring in the girls' basketball team this time, what was different about it was that it wasn't trouble that stemmed from the intensity of class or exams, but trouble that stemmed from training and teamwork.

"Ruga herself will probably deny this, but to be perfectly clear, Naoetsu High's girlsbas was a club made around Kanbaru Suruga, because of Kanbaru Suruga, for Kanbaru Suruga, after all… Even from when I joined, I proactively worked to lead the club in direction, as well," said Higasa-chan. "I don't think doing that in itself was wrong, and it was because of that that we could make it to Nationals, after all. The problem was that, even after Ruga hurt her left arm and had to retire, that arrangement ended up being passed down as is… At least when I was captain, I did my best to fool the club to somehow keep things going, but after retiring in April, it fell apart all in one go."

A goal that was too far, training that was too hard, peer pressure that couldn't be escaped…

Not a sense of solidarity, but a sense of collective responsibility.

"Sports isn't something people should be suffering through, so if it's that harsh, then I feel like they'd be better off resigning, though."

Since the club was formed around her existence, it was hard to deny it completely, but Kanbaru, who was usually a straightforward person, spoke instead with a weak tone of voice.

"Even if they did want to resign, they probably don't want to be the first to do so."

"That's something I can't understand."

"Well, of course *you* can't, Ruga." And, as if exasperated, or maybe to sidestep the subject, Higasa-chan said, "There were kids that did resign, of course. Not that they sent in with an official notification of their resignation, since they resigned after getting hurt during practice."

Higasa-chan made it sound like they got hurt on purpose to

resign… And I couldn't say that I didn't understand how they felt.

Although I couldn't say it was exactly the same, when I'd been studying for exams, I'd been tempted by the idea of hurting myself in order to avoid tackling a problem set for hours on end—of course, because of my vampire constitution, it didn't actually go well, but I could only say that there had been something wrong with me at the time.

In other words, there was something wrong here.

With the girls' basketball team right now.

Because they'd lost the support of the Kanbaru era—or rather, they'd lost the core.

"So, we knew we needed to do something about it, so we had a meeting of the OG third-years and debated over what to do, and, well, it's not like we didn't try to put some of our countermeasures in action, but it was like they backfired, since over the past few days, more and more members have stopped coming to school—and because it looks like there are no problems on the surface, it feels even worse than it should be. Even the ones that are having a hard time feel a sense of fulfillment or get filled with euphoria when they reach a stopping point, so they get stuck in place. And if someone carelessly complains about something, everyone else gets together and enjoys criticizing that person."

"It's hard for us to change that structure from where we are, Araragi-senpai. Or rather, it's because our generation is the one that made that structure in the first place, so what they're doing is almost exactly the same as what we're doing."

"Yeah. The difference is just how they feel about it. …Um, it's possible that maybe we were wrong to set that up in the first place. Our advisor, who'd lived in an age of corporal punishment and a prevalent pecking order, had given us the opinion that 'it might not fit the current generation, but it was still good in its own way', and we didn't want to ignore that. Well, from the day I joined to the day I retired, I'm pretty sure I had fun every day, right?"

Well, who knows.

It was true that it was hard to deny a process before seeing the results, but the undeniable reality was that, even if they said and did the same things, if the people doing those things changed, then the impression would also change—however, in that case, I could understand how Kanbaru and Higasa-chan felt, about how it would be hard to guide their juniors that were just imitating them.

"The school itself is keeping us from saying anything, so we were basically at our wits' end when you approached us, Araragi-senpai. I almost thought this was a godsend."

They must have really been at their wits' end if they thought

being approached by a pervert was a godsend, but anyway.

It was true that the timing was good.

Considering the current era, if it weren't for this timing, I doubted Higasa-chan would've even told me about the register's existence—however, I still couldn't say if this was inevitable or just a coincidence.

If the trouble in the girls' basketball team had a direct connection to the vampire turmoil occurring in this town—for Higasa-chan, she probably would never have guessed that I was already busy trying to resolve that trouble.

"…Hmm."

However, I still stopped to think.

I stopped to compare things with my experiences from last year… or not. What I was actually remembering were the words of my classmate, Hanekawa.

At the time, she had certainly been having some trouble, even though she didn't show it. And Hanekawa Tsubasa, whose worries had driven her up to the wall, had thought, during her spring break as a 17-year-old, that she "wanted to meet a vampire".

It was an earnest desire.

It was despair.[1]

To meet an incomprehensible monster that could burst through the immovable walls of reality, of real problems, in a single blow—even after graduating from high school, the Hanekawa that had spread her wings overseas was like that.

In that case, was it really so farfetched to infer that the students troubled over their club and worried about their school life thought, in the same way, that "it would be so much easier if a vampire came and attacked me"…?

And if that strong, earnest desire—or perhaps, that strong despair—was the missing link that connected the victims.

I couldn't afford to not determine the whereabouts of the remaining two names that had gone missing—especially if they hadn't been mummified yet, but no, even if they did already have their blood sucked.

"I got it, Higasa-chan. I don't really think a blockhead like me can do anything about the delicate problems that girls face—but if you can lend me that register, I promise I'll do my best to make sure that no more members go missing among your juniors, at the very least."

"Just you promising that is enough for me."

And though I knew that my words wouldn't give any peace of mind, Higasa-chan still said that and lowered her arms that had been raised all this time, handing over the register to me.

“By the way, Araragi-senpai, do you have a girlfriend?”

Nervously wondering about what would have happened if I had said that I didn't, and feeling embarrassed at myself for allowing myself to be teased by a high school girl that I'd met for the first time, I once again headed back to the Naoetsu General Hospital.

I'd ended up feeling a lot gloomier as a graduate of Naoetsu High, but just from the results, I'd managed to obtain the member list of the girls' basketball team fairly easily, so I assumed Gaen-san would still be in the middle of her nap in preparation for the night, and I started thinking about how I might be praised for my quick work, but when I arrived, the specialist was already awake.

Didn't she only sleep for about 30 minutes?

Even though she'd said that pulling an all-nighter was rough, was this woman also a short sleeper, like other eminent figures were…? In any case, I returned to the first hospital room I'd visited that day, containing the mummy of Harimaze Kie-chan, first-year of Naoetsu High and a member of the girls' basketball team, and relayed the information to Gaen-san in much the same way as a carrier pigeon would.

"I see. You're really living out your youth, huh?"

Those were her first words.

Well, for Gaen-san, who was from a completely different era, and had never even attended Naoetsu High, that may be how it seemed.

As someone who'd known firsthand of Kanbaru Suruga flourishing as a versatile superstar, it honestly pained me just hearing about the state of affairs in the current girls' basketball team, but it was useless to try and have those feelings be shared by an unrelated third party.

It was surely the same as how, for a fresh-faced college first-year like me, the concepts of employment or marriage were something I still couldn't understand.

"That's a little upsetting to hear. Even this onee-san had a period where she was in her youth, you know? A youth spent with Oshino and Kaiki and Kagenui… And a youth spent with my sister. Indeed, just as how youth is written with the kanji for 'blue' and 'spring', it was a springtime that turned me blue with shock."

"…I'm very sorry about that."

However, it was absolutely true that I couldn't picture Gaen-san and company in their teenage years… Especially not a teenage version of Kanbaru's mother, Gaen Tooe-san.

"From what you're saying, Koyomin, so far, there's no evidence

to conclude that this has anything to do with the girls' mummification, but there is equally no evidence to dismiss it as irrelevant, either. So the members of the girls' basketball team were feeling depressed, wondering why they had to sacrifice their studies and devote themselves to grueling practices, when the seniors that would aim that high were already gone—and perhaps the vampire was attracted by the darkness in their hearts. That hypothesis does have a certain degree of plausibility."

"Oddities have a fitting reason to their existence—right?"

"Well, let this onee-san that knows everything tell you that the period of time that Suruga was a member of the team wasn't necessarily a healthy and beautiful adolescence, either. Putting aside the other girls, it wasn't as if that niece of mine got faster for a positive reason."

Indeed.

The superstar hadn't been a superstar from the moment she was born. Rather, circumstances made it so that she *had to become* a superstar.

Because she made a wish to a monkey.

"Even if she was freed from that monkey, it doesn't mean she's been freed from the worries of her adolescence. Well, it's the fate of upperclassmen to be bothered by their underclassmen. We'll just have to roll with it in order to uphold the cheap promise you made, Koyomin."

First off, why don't we focus on searching for the remaining two "missing" members of the club?—said Gaen-san, deciding on our plan of action after riffling through the register I gave her.

"Of course, we'll also be confirming the locations of the remaining members, too. Kanguu Misago-chan and Kiseki Souwa-chan—both second-years."

"Hypothetically, if those two have already had a run-in with the vampire, then out of the five victims, there would be three second-years and two first-years."

Not that I could draw any conclusions from that, and I might have been getting ahead of myself considering their mummies hadn't been discovered yet.

But I didn't want to turn away from unpleasant possibilities just because the pessimism would bum me out—I wanted to think of everything I could, so that I could deal with the worst-case scenario.

3:2… That was the ratio of the club members.

"Oh yeah. Gaen-san. I only thought of this afterwards, but do you think it's possible that the living message that Kuchimoto-chan left behind on that flashcard was actually the vampire's signature?"

"I'd say it's very possible."

It seemed that it was a possibility that she'd already considered, as she responded to my question in an instant—the initials, huh?

"D/V/S".

"However, there was nothing of the sort in the belongings of either Harimaze Kie-chan here or Honnou Aburi-chan in the next room. Of course, there were no living messages either. But if the 'B777Q' on the flashcard is actually a signature, it would make more sense if a similar code was left with every mummy."

That was true… But for her to have already verified that—did this person really take a nap while I was gone?

"In Kuchimoto-chan's case, instead of being on a public street or in a private house, she was in an abandoned shack. Maybe the vampire felt that they could work leisurely without worrying about being seen?"

As I said that, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Without worrying about being seen? Work leisurely?

A vampire worrying about being seen sounded like some sort of slapstick comedy… In that case, it would make more sense that they had left a code behind with the mummies of Harimaze-chan and Honnou-chan, a code that didn't seem like a code.

"There are a couple more things that don't make sense, Koyomin. If you explain this as a vampire leaving their signature in much the same way an artist signs their name on a work of art, it's pretty hair-raising and very appropriate for an oddity story—but in that case, don't you think they would have added it to a *work that they'd be more proud of*?"

At least, they wouldn't be doing it on a *failure*… —said Gaen-san, looking up from the register and towards the mummy on the bed.

I see.

As an ordinary person, my thoughts came to a standstill when I lay my eyes upon such a gruesome mummy, but in the end, a mummy like this was something that had "failed" to become a vampire—no matter how much they longed to be in the limelight, there was surely no artist that would sign their name on a failed work.

Then, should I simply assume that it was just a living message left behind by Kuchimoto-chan?

"I performed a handwriting analysis. I compared the writing in red pen on the flashcard with the writing in her notebook that I found in her bag—however, I couldn't come to a definite conclusion. There didn't seem to be any matches in the handwriting, but if they were scribbling it down while being attacked by a vampire, it would make sense for it to be messy."

"That's true… Well, in the end, whether it's a living message or

a signature, it doesn't really matter."

"Although, from our perspective as the pursuers, a vampire that longs to be in the limelight is much easier to find, so that would be helpful. But anyway, as the commander, I'd like to give you a command to follow, Koyomin."

"Ah. Yes. What is it?"

The sun was about to set. Time was running out.

We were entering the world of the night.

It seemed that, after the reconnaissance and discussion, it was finally time to come up with a practical response to this oddity phenomenon—thanks to talking with Kanbaru and Higasa-chan, my motivation to solve the case had increased as much as my mood had decreased, but now, what did I need to do?

"I was really unsure about whether or not I should ask this of you… But it seems I'll have to after all. Koyomin. This is only something you can do."

Gaen-san spoke with a serious expression.

"I'd like you to hold Shinobu-chan back for tonight."

"You aren't hiding something from me, are you?"

A little girl with golden hair and golden eyes.

The mere shadow of a vampire, or perhaps the dregs of a vampire—in the past, she'd been feared as the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, the king of oddities, a monster among monsters that lived for nearly six hundred years, by the name of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. But her current, completely changed form was now that of Oshino Shinobu, and that was the question she posed in Koyomi's room in the Araragi house.

"Oi, oi, what are you saying all of a sudden, Shinobu-chan? If you're going to doubt me like that, then our relationship of mutual dependence would be over."

"As if! We're in too deep. As you can see, I'm bound to your shadow as if I've been nailed to it, tightly and firmly."

"Now, now. Look, Shinobu-chan. It's the donuts that you love so much, see? It's the Golden Chocolate, see?"

"That makes you even more suspicious, my master. Don't speak with such a wheedling voice. There's clearly something you're trying to gloss over."

She was sharp. Like a fang.

During spring break when I was seventeen years old, the legendary vampire, who had bitten down upon the nape of my neck and enslaved me, had been bitten back by me and enslaved in return—she had become the legendary slave.

However, despite saying stuff like "my master", she did not seem to want to follow my orders at all. This slave was not at all convinced by my well-reasoned and impeccable attitude, but rather seemed to have deepened her doubts.

Shit, Gaen-san sure was asking a lot from me.

Hiding something from Shinobu was harder than hiding something from my parents—she and I had an inseparable bond, with two hearts beating as one.

If anything, it might have been easier to run headfirst into dazzling battles against vampires, just like my spring break at seventeen, but with a pacifist specialist and moderate strategist at the helm, it didn't seem like we could take the simple approach.

I had to hold Shinobu back until the sun rose again.

I didn't know why I had to do such a thing—I'd asked her during the daytime, "What should we tell Shinobu about this case?" And the answer that Gaen-san came up with while she slept was not to ask for her cooperation, but rather the strategy of keeping her at a

distance.

She was totally just being excluded!

Even though we weren't on the topic of the girls' basketball team, it seemed that bullying was still a thing even among evil spirits… Haah, poor thing.

"Don't look at me with such a pitying gaze. Don't send your feelings of pity at me! What in the world happened during the day? Who did you meet?"

"Oi, oi, Shinobu. Do you really think I would do something like going around and seeing other people?"

"I do. You should at least go out and see people!"

"Now, now. Look, it's the Half & Half from Mister Donut."

"Even if you try to sidestep the matter with something like that… Eh? Half of it is a Pon de Ring, and the other half is an Old Fashioned? It's like a donut from my dreams! Panaino!"

With a sidelong glance at Shinobu who began chewing, I measured the time remaining until sunrise—right now, it was 10 pm, so there was still about 7 hours.

I wondered if I could make it.

Ultimately, since Shinobu was bound to my shadow, it was possible to keep her confined as long as I stubbornly stayed put, but it didn't feel right to force her to just stand by.

Even if it was a request from Gaen-san, who I was much obliged to, I didn't want to do anything that could create a crack in my relationship with Shinobu from here on out.

Since we were in so deep, that was something I wanted to continue.

"That's right, Shinobu. There's something about that deeply memorable spring break that I've always wanted to ask about."

"If it's something you've been wanting to ask for a year and a half, why did you not ask it sooner…?"

Shinobu knit her eyebrows in confusion, but it wasn't like I could tell her that it was a question I had just thought up for the sake of stalling for time.

"During that spring break, you sucked out my blood and turned me into an immortal vampire. You remember, right? With you on the verge of death, I said something like, 'Dying like this suits me pretty well, so this isn't so bad,' and chuckled nihilistically before offering up the nape of my neck…"

"Is something wrong with your memory? Did you use it all up studying for exams?"

The truth was that I was crying when it happened.

But, putting aside whether I was laughing or crying, at that point, I'd turned into a vampire… That was what had happened, but

I'd learned from Gaen-san at the hospital that there'd been plenty of potential for that to have failed.

It was actually more likely for the creation of a vampire's thrall to fail, she'd said—and with three mummified high school girls having been verified, it was a fact that I fully understood, to the point that it sent chills down my spine.

And in that case, what I'd suddenly become curious about was…

"What would have happened if, at that time, my vampire transformation had failed? In the first place, what meaning does a failure hold to the vampire master?"

"Ka ka. So the time has finally come to speak of that, then."

Including the Half & Half, Shinobu had made short work of the donuts I'd prepared, and assumed quite the haughty attitude—I mean, it wasn't like I was trying to touch upon such a grandiose secret.

"You sure have grown, my master. Not that you'd actually grow, considering you're immortal!"

"Don't just retort to your own joke. And let me grow! I'm not immortal anymore, anyway. Besides, what kind of growth have you shown in the past year?"

Rather than growth, it was more like regression.

Well, going from a beautiful lady to a cute little girl was a genuine regression… But anyway, this question was made for a reason beyond just stalling for time.

If my vampire transformation had failed at the time.

Would I have become a mummy? And, before she was called Oshino Shinobu, would Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade have been able to survive?

For vampires, the act of sucking blood is like nutrients, but if a vampire were to fail at transforming their target into a vampire, would they simultaneously fail in gaining those nutrients?

During that spring break, the King of Oddities had certainly said this.

One whose blood is sucked by a vampire is turned into a vampire, without exception—there was no discretion, it was just a matter of eating it all up or leaving some behind.

In other words, in order to prevent the *unnecessarily proliferation* of thralls, they couldn't leave any behind—would that just be indigestion?

In the end, were the high school girl mummies successes or failures—as the creator, were they failed products unworthy of signatures? It was hard to figure out.

Right now, the vampire that Gaen-san was chasing. With what purpose—or perhaps, with what motive—were they going after the

Naoetsu High girls' basketball team members? If we could figure that out, it would help establish a point of reference.

Even if it was temporary, I wanted an additional line.

If the motive was just an appetite for the sake of gaining nutrients, then it didn't make sense for them to leave anything behind, even if it was just a skin-and-bones mummy. But if they were trying to increase the number of their thralls, then it was a series of failures that was rather disgraceful—what exactly was this vampire trying to do?

"To get straight to the point, if you had failed to become my thrall, my slave, then you would have turned into a zombie incapable of any thought. You remember, don't you? That day, when we visited a different timeline and saw a bunch of living corpses."

"Ah—yeah, we did."

I see.

For those cases, the image I had of those immortal creatures was like a humid, rotten lump of flesh that was sticky and squishy, so I hadn't connected them to these mummies in my mind, but now that she'd mentioned it, I had already known about the precedent.

It was surprising how such an intense and memorable experience could be overlooked when looking at it from a different angle—then, going off of the assumption that losing the ability to think and losing consciousness were similar, then those examples of failures… In that timeline, the "Oshino Shinobu from another route" was in a kind of despair, and had no purpose or motive.

Could this vampire also be in despair? A case of binge eating out of despair… Far from stoic forward-thinking or a smart sense of purpose, it could be a rampage of complete desperation.

Well, I didn't know that many vampires to hypothesize a pattern… Like the number of friends I had in high school, I could count them on one hand.

And, as for the span of time I spent as a vampire (though it felt like an eternity to me), it had only lasted a mere two weeks, so I couldn't be counted in that. So first, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

Then, there was the giant professional, Dramaturgy, who came to Japan as a vampire hunter of his own kind, in pursuit of the king of oddities… And yet another vampire hunter, the white-uniformed professional, Episode—well, strictly speaking he was just a half-vampire, but it was fine to include dhampirs in the count.

And finally, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's first thrall—Shishirui Seishirou…

Four people. Well, they weren't exactly people, so I guess I should say four vampires? In any case, the sample size was a bit too

small for me to use as a reference in analyzing the state of this vampire… Well, for a normal human, one encounter with a vampire in a lifetime would be more than enough, but with four vampires (five if you include this one) in a little over a year—Araragi Koyomi's vampire life is truly bountiful, wouldn't you say?

Although all of them were linked to Shinobu—Hm… Well, hold on.

Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on.

That's right, that was certainly a glaring oversight…

If we were talking about links to Shinobu, then while I had never come in direct contact, I was certainly aware of the existence of *yet another* vampire.

Though I'd never met them.

I knew.

Though I'd overlooked it.

Without exaggerating—I can say that, if it weren't for that vampire, I wouldn't be where I am today. Because.

"Shinobu. Speaking of which, you've never told me about *the vampire that turned you into a vampire*—the vampire that's essentially my origin."

"Ka ka. So the time has finally come to speak of that, then."

Shinobu repeated the same line as before, revealing the narrow range of lines that she could think of. And then,

"So the time has come to speak of the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire—the one who birthed me and the one who gave me my name, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster," she said.

What did she just say?

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

Surprisingly enough, it wasn't the first time I had heard the name—or rather, it was a name that I'd just heard that day.

"D/V/S".

Somehow.

With that, I understood everything. No, not everything, but almost everything. That was why Gaen-san had ordered me to contain Shinobu for the night. It had felt like the kind of job that didn't make sense, that I wasn't really sure if it was a job or not—and if I may say so, a rather unrewarding role for how tiresome it was—but that wasn't it at all.

There was no mission that was more important than this.

In the first place, it was because Shinobu had gotten in the way when it came to the resurrection of her first thrall, Shishirui Seishirou, whom she'd once been separated from by life and death, that Gaen-san was forced to make a difficult decision on whether or not to request her cooperation for this case—and even then, this time it was no longer her thrall, but her *former master*.

Not in the way that she called me "my master" half as a joke and half for fun, but a true "master" in every sense of the word.

It might not stop at just getting in the way—in the worst-case scenario, Oshino Shinobu, who was supposed to be certified as harmless, might end up actively joining the other side. If this little girl, broken down to the point that she'd be in a good mood just from eating donuts, were to once again become the bloodsucking legendary vampire…

A return to the dark side.

Well, because she was such a legend herself, of course there was no way that Gaen-san, the administrator of specialists wouldn't know the name of the vampire that was the source of that legend—the onee-san that knew everything.

Therefore, as soon as the solution to the code was revealed to be "D/V/S", she immediately had a hunch that they were initials.

This completely ordinary town may have had oddity stories occur one after another, but that was when there was no god presiding over it—and now, why was it that yet another vampire would appear so soon, as if mocking the peace that we had laboriously established here? I'd thought it was weird—I'd thought that it could only be an oddity story because it was weird—but if there was a reason like that, then it would explain the drastic change.

If the vampire named Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster had

come to *visit* her former thrall, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—just like Shishirui Seishirou, who had approached Shinobu to recover the Demon Blade "Kokorowatari".

Well, originally, his case had the implication of him returning to his hometown…

"Hm? What's the matter? Were you frightened? Did you get too scared to ask about what kind of a nightwalker would give birth to a strong, beautiful, yet fragile vampire like me? Ka ka, quite understandable. The story about the lord of a castle of corpses is so repulsive, it can chill your blood. Even I'm trembling with fear right here."

Shinobu, deliberately making a gesture as if to give herself goosebumps, seemed to be somewhat proud of herself—this was a kind of excitement I didn't see often, despite my close relationship with her.

Was it because she was talking about someone even closer to her, with an even deeper relationship? I felt the way I did when I watched Kanbaru and Higasa-chan play around earlier.

It felt similar to when I saw a junior that I was close with speak even more candidly with a friend that she was even closer with—it would be a lie if I said that I didn't want to accuse Higasa-chan of being overly familiar with Kanbaru, despite her being such a capable junior that would actually treat me like a senior in this day and age. Though it was a little different from jealousy.

Thinking about it now, as equivalent thralls, I had definitely felt something close to jealousy when I faced off against Shishirui Seishirou—that had gotten me worked up, and it had also caused trouble for Gaen-san.

Back then, I had gotten in the way almost as much as Shinobu had—however, if it came to her vampire master, then they wouldn't be someone to be jealous of.

That would be like being jealous of your girlfriend's dad… If anything, I would even like to hear some of Shinobu's stories from when she was human, and the fact that Shinobu had something she could speak proudly of would make me happy as well—if it only weren't for the current situation.

If the main character of the oddity story that Shinobu was telling me about so happily was using their poisonous fangs—their demonic fangs—to bite into the female students of Naoetsu High one after another, it would be hard to just listen to her with a smile.

"Well, I'd even forgotten that I used to be a human until I got into this mess with you last year—I haven't seen Suicidemaster in almost 600 years. Ka ka, she was a genuine vampire who lived quite the reckless lifestyle, so I'm sure she's rotting away somewhere by

now.”

“…Hey. Shinobu. When you say ‘reckless lifestyle’, what do you mean by that specifically?”

I asked timidly.

Of course, it wasn’t that I was afraid of the ghost story—what I was afraid of was facing the truth. Calm down—it was possible that everything was just me jumping to conclusions.

It was something that happened quite often, me jumping to conclusions.

“Indeed. Unlike me, who eats everything no matter if it’s an oddity or not, Suicidemaster was quite the gourmet. Once she’d decided upon her menu, she would stubbornly refuse to eat any other food.”

Oho.

So basically, if she decided that she would only suck the blood of female students belonging to a certain club in a certain high school, she wouldn’t even give other humans the time of day?

“In fact, at the time, Suicidemaster had almost starved to death when she decided to suck my blood while I was still human. Well, I’m the one who let her suck my blood out of pity. Nihilistically saying, ‘Dying like this suits me pretty well, so this isn’t so bad’…”

“You’re saying the same thing I did.”

“You can’t fight your blood.”

I wonder about that. If this continued, then it wouldn’t end at just fighting—it could very well turn into a bloodbath… It was in order to avoid this that Gaen-san diverted her policy and took on the formation that had me mark Shinobu…

But, in that case, I would rather not have known that fact… I should have been a college student that didn’t know anything, just as the onee-san that knew everything had arranged me to be.

Sure enough, Shinobu, who had been chattering away in a lively manner up until now, suddenly came to her senses.

“…Huh? Why was I talking about Suicidemaster at this point, all of a sudden?”

She tilted her head to the side—oh, crap.

“If I recall correctly, this originated from the question that you asked…”

“Good grief. Not slipping when asked, not slipping when talking, and yet slipping when asked again—I’m always so paradoxical, aren’t I?”

“No, I think you just normally let it slip when asked.”

Umm.

I’d already run out of the donuts from Mister Donut that I could have used in a pinch—whether he knew everything or knew

nothing, now that he had become a college student, Araragi Koyomi could no longer use the method of a kiss to tide things over, like the Italians did. Not that it was any more justifiable as a high school student.

There was still plenty of time remaining until dawn, but just as I'd been backed into a corner, salvation descended upon me.

I heard a quick knock on the door to my room.

"Yes, yes, I'm opening it nooow. Could it be Karen? Or maybe Tsukihi? Or maybe the news that my child was born?"

"What if you opened the door like that and it was your mother?"

"If the news was that my sister had become a mother, how could I not congratulate her? Welcome, I'd say. Or perhaps, happy birthday."

However, when I opened the door, the hallway was empty.

"Over here, *oni* onii-chan."

A young girl appeared at the window.

"Happy birthday."

013

Ononoki Yotsugi-chan. An immortal falsely similar to a vampire, a doll girl and a corpse doll (this had nothing to do with what we were talking about earlier, but her existence was close to that of a zombie—a physical oddity similar to Frankenstein's monster), and *shikigami* of Kagenui Yozuru-san, the specialist traveling from a great distance away to return to Japan. And right now, in Tsukihi's room in the Araragi house, she was freeloading as a stuffed doll.

She had taken up the role of a nearby overseer that was monitoring Shinobu and me closely to ascertain whether our certification as harmless was really appropriate, but at the present moment, the young *shikigami* girl was, to me, a goddess of salvation.

"Wow, if it isn't Ononoki-chan! You came at just the right time. Now, don't hold back. Come and sit down right on my lap. My lap will be your child seat."

"My master, before you say such creepy things, at least retort to the doll girl's sketch comedy technique of knocking on the door yet coming in through the window."

"Please make yourself at home, Lord Ononoki."

"Is she a noble?"

Shinobu looked at me with even more suspicion, but it seemed that she had to lay aside those doubts in order to deal with her natural enemy that had flanked her—so far so good.

Call me creepy or even a degenerate, but anyway, I'd planned on plunging headfirst into bantering about a child seat with a little girl and a young girl as a vivid reminder of my high school days, but…

"Fortunately for me, I'm not so free that I can spend time lounging around on your lap, *oni* onii-chan," said Ononoki-chan, expressionless and indifferent.

No, this girl (and though I said "girl", she was the *tsukumogami* of a corpse that had been used for a hundred years) was always expressionless.

Because she's a corpse.

"Thanks to you, even though my employer, the *onmyouji* onee-chan, is away, I get to keep working. I'm making a huge profit. I'm laughing like, 'wahaha'."

She didn't look like she was going "wahaha", though (because she was expressionless).

"It's the know-how of wahaha."

"If such a know-how exists, I'd like for you to teach it to me."

But Gaen-san had said something like that, too… Ononoki-

chan was in charge of a separate case.

That it was important to not sweat the small stuff.

In that case, she really must have just come with perfect timing, as opposed to coming here on Gaen-san's orders to support me in marking Shinobu—in that case, for what reason?

"What? Should I not have come without a reason?"

"Are you a childhood friend? My childhood friend doesn't act that spoiled. If it weren't for Hanekawa's support, she might not have even made it to college."

"I just felt like seeing your chaos, *oni* onii-chan."

"Don't come to see my chaos. At least come to see my face."[2]

Although as a matter of fact, her timing was pretty chaotic—though the problem was, that chaos didn't show any signs of ending anytime soon.

"Hup."

Ononoki-chan stepped over the window frame and entered the room—she wasn't a vampire, so she didn't need permission to enter.

How in the world did she knock like that? Was it a magic trick?

"It's true, I really don't have a reason. I was out for work and I just barely arrived home when it turned out that dumbass Tsukihi was in her room. She's studying or something."

She was an oppressive and insolent middle school third-year that it was unavoidable for her to be called a dumbass, but I guess she's surprisingly diligent when no one's looking, that sister of mine—since Tsukihi thought that Ononoki-chan was a life-sized stuffed doll, she couldn't possibly enter through Tsukihi's window, so the hard worker had no choice but to return home through the alternate route of using my window.

Then, really and truly, how in the world did you knock like that. Did you borrow the power of the *yanari* phenomenon? Was it a phantom knock?

"However, it looks like I'm intruding upon you guys. Well, busy as I am, I can leave for the attic or whatever, so feel free to continue your discussion—oh, that reminds me."

While I'd been racking my brain trying to figure out a way to detain Ononoki-chan as she was about to make her hasty exit, she stopped just then to feel around her chest, as if she'd just thought of something.

What did that young girl plan on pulling out from her chest?

"Don't tell me you're going to use 'Unlimited Rulebook' to make your breasts huge!? Stop it, stop it! There are some lines you just shouldn't cross, Ononoki-chan!"

"I don't want to be warned about crossing humanity's K-point

by someone like you, *oni* onii-chan. Here. A souvenir."

"A souvenir?"

Had she really gone that far away for work? Even if Ononoki Yotsugi-chan busied herself with urban legends, with Kagenui-san's absence, I figured her current range of activities would not deviate from this neighborhood.

However, when I took what she offered to me, it was not any kind of *senbei* or cookies indicating "Just visited ____", and instead, a piece of paper that had been folded ultra-thin.

In other words, it was a fortune slip.

Don't tell me she was trying to make the fortune slip she got at some shrine into a souvenir? Because fortune slips and charms and stuff are hard to throw away? Even as I thought, "I'm not going to accept this if it's nothing less than 'great luck'", I opened it up.

"Well. If it isn't a fortune slip from Kitashirahebi Shrine, where that lost girl works as a god," said Shinobu, taking a look at my hands and saying it out loud to make it easy to understand.

Incidentally, the fortune was "average luck".

Average luck.

It wasn't really clear to me if that was good or bad.

"So when you said you were working, you just went to play around with that lost girl, hm? You should've called me, too."

"I didn't go there to play. New as she is, Mayoi-nee-san is a lost child that rules over this town, after all. If I want to be able to do my work properly, I have to go through the proper channels, or else—"

While Shinobu and Ononoki-chan were partaking in a conspiratorial exchange that may have been friendly or unfriendly, I inspected the fortune slip.

–

Love—Treat your girlfriend preciously!

Studies—Don't let your guard down! Keep going without resting!

Health—Your mind is really in poor health!

Someone Waiting—You should go and see them yourself!

Business—Being a yes-man is dangerous!

–

What a high-energy oracle…

With her manner of speech, it did feel a lot like Hachikuji… As for the "Business" fortune, if it was referring to my current role as requested by Gaen-san, then "being a yes-man is dangerous" may have been just the advice I wanted to hear.

It was a good feeling.

This must be average luck for the sake of Araragi, averarage luck—but no.

That wasn't what I should be paying attention to. Well, that was important, too, but what I should focus on was—

"Ononoki-chan. You don't need to go to the attic. Until Tsukihi-chan leaves her room, you're free to just hang out here."

I stood up.

"The child seat and its child are going to go out for a late-night drive."

It was time to go and see the person waiting for me.

014

Hachikuji Mayoi had just been a lost grade schooler when I met her last year on Mother's Day, but now she'd become a splendid god. Even if it weren't for this case with the vampire, I knew it wasn't a good idea to visit her so casually due to her position, and I'd been careful not to rely on her (literally, pray to a god). But it was a different story if she was the one to call me.

Gaen-san had ordered me to keep watch over Shinobu, but she hadn't told me that I necessarily had to keep watch over her at home. Despite her previous offense, it wasn't as if Shinobu had been sentenced to house arrest.

But to deliver a message through Ononoki-chan through not a living message nor a dying message nor anything encrypted but a fortune slip of all things… It was surely something only a god could do.

The Kitashirahebi Shrine.

Built on top of a mountain, it was a shrine with deep connections and karma for me, and for everyone in this town.

If I was Lupin III, I could have simply ridden up the mountain in my New Beetle, but alas, I couldn't go against the Road Traffic Act or my own common sense. So I parked my beloved car at the shoulder of the road, placed Shinobu on my shoulders (my shoulders were also a child seat), and began to laboriously climb up the mountain path.

Due to the aftereffects of my vampirism, while I wasn't exactly nocturnal, I was still pretty strong at night—in times like these, I had no need for night-vision goggles.

"However, what business could that lost girl have with you? Does everyone really just want to see my master's chaos?"

Yes, I was curious about that, too. No, not my chaos, but her business with me—Hachikuji should have learned her lesson (or rather, Gaen-san mercilessly beat the lesson into her), so she shouldn't be behaving as freely as she used to.

She wouldn't just invite an ordinary citizen to the top of the mountain without any business—so maybe she had a few words to say about the serial mummy vampire incident secretly going on in this town, after all?

It was easy to get mad at me for this, but if the origin of this vampire's visit was Shinobu, then I had no choice but to take the blame for it, as her supervisor.

It was a violation of a virtuous supervisor's duty of care. Putting aside whether or not I had any virtues as a supervisor.

To be honest, responding to Hachikuji's summons did make me

glad that I could gracefully escape from Shinobu's interrogation, but if what Hachikuji had to say had anything to do with this matter once we finished climbing the mountain, it would be a dead end for me.

A girl at the front gate, and a little girl at the back gate.

I had no choice but to hope that it was about something completely different. For example, maybe Hachikuji had decided to appoint me to sit upon not a child seat, but the seat of a god (in which case, I would humbly accept).

Really, I had no idea where my utterly random life was headed anymore. My life wasn't simply going forward, but hurling itself forward. Without coming up with any ingenious plans, the climb was completed.

Hachikuji was sitting under a waterfall in white clothing.

"Oh, how embarrassing. You ended up seeing me secretly trying to train."

"What part of this is secret? I've never seen anything so blatant. It almost felt like you weren't under a waterfall, but under a spotlight."

When did this shrine even have a waterfall?

Don't misuse your godly powers just for laughs.

She hadn't fixed her free-spiritedness at all.

"Oh dear. So this is not what they mean by a beautiful girl, glistening like the morning dew."

Of course not.

With a splash, Hachikuji made her way out of the waterfall basin… She was soaked completely through, and it was not in the least bit romantic. Her trademark twintails had been flattened against her head by the water pressure, and her white clothing clung to her body, making it difficult for her to move.

That open-mindedness. Truly a god.

"Anyway, it has been a while, Amefurashi-san."

"It's certainly been a while, eternal fifth-grader Hachikuji, but just because you're soaking wet, that doesn't mean you can call your friend by the name of a gastropod mollusk.[3] And you're not sopping wet because I made it rain[4] or anything. I'm sorry if you went and got hit by a waterfall just so you could call me that, but my name is Araragi."

"Sorry. I flubbed it."

"No, it was on purpose."

"I fwubbed it."

"It wasn't on purpose!?"

"Ti debbuwf I."

"Even backwards, it wasn't on purpose!?"

No, that had to be on purpose.

And in any case, it really had been a while since I'd been here, but with the usual exchange that made it feel as if it hadn't been any time at all, Hachikuji and I celebrated our reunion.

"I wanted to see you too, Nobushi-san."

"Who are you calling Nobushi. By anagramming it, you've turned a ninja into a samurai.[5] My name is Shinobu… Wait, am I doing this too?"

"Sorry. I flubbed it."

"Nay, 'twas on purpose."

"I fwubbed it."

"'Twas not on purpose!?"

"I fubwebd it."

"Even anagrammed, 'twas not on purpose!?"

With the girl and the little girl chattering away, it seemed pretty fun. Unlike the world of the animation's commentary tracks, they were heartwarmingly close.

Why was it only in the commentary tracks that they didn't get along? It's usually the other way around.

Well, Shinobu, as Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, had also been exquisitely enshrined as a god in the past, so in that sense, it wasn't just a relationship between a girl and a little girl, but perhaps a senior-junior relationship as well.

A junior, huh? Hmm.

"Anyway, Anagra-san."

"You're prolonging this, aren't you? If you take what you flubbed and link it to a new way of flubbing, this passage will last forever!"

"Anyway anyway, Araragi-san. The reason I went to the trouble of asking the very busy Ononoki-chan to summon you to this mountain at this late hour is none other than this."

Although I was hoping there was another reason.

"The truth is, there was a little girl I wanted to introduce to you, Araragi-san."

"Oho? It sounds like there are some circumstances."

"If you wanted to be introduced to a little girl without any circumstances, you'd have to be totally crazy!"

From the little girl who showed no intention of descending from her seat atop my shoulders even after we'd finished our mountain climb, I received an elbow to the head.

"To be precise, it's not to Araragi-san, but to Shinobu-san."

"Huhu. It seems you're the one that's totally crazy, Shinobu-chan."

"Don't act so proud of yourself with a little girl on your shoulders. And don't shrug your shoulders, either, it clings. There's a

right way and a wrong way to shrug your shoulders, you know.”

“D-do you really need to go that far? All I did was shrug my shoulders, though?”

“Now, lost girl. What of the little girl you wished to introduce to me?”

“Yes. Right this way.”

Hachikuji went up the shrine road on the grounds and towards the main shrine—and we followed in the footsteps of the young god as they were marked down on the ground with wet, bare feet.

“Yes. Just the other day, there was a lost child that came under my custody… Incidentally, she was naked.”

“Oh, a naked little girl, you say? Who knows if that can be adapted for the anime. It’s a fine line to walk.”

“It’s way out of bounds! Sanitize it!”[6]

She retorted with a pun.

“Sanitize the little girls!”

You meant, clean up every important point, right?[7]

Even if you punned on every important point.

“Anyway, it’s out of bounds even in a novel, is it not?”

“And yet, it can’t be avoided. After all, we’re for social awareness, getting straight to the heart of taboos.”

“Not for social inappropriateness?”

But, to be serious, I was a little relieved.

I had no idea who this naked little girl was, but apparently it was a completely different case from the matter that I was cooperating with Gaen-san on—the matter with Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

And considering Hachikuji’s origins, you could say that taking custody of lost children was practically a livelihood for her.

As long as we didn’t run into the novel and stupid development that the progenitor who birthed and named the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire was actually a little girl, and a naked little girl at that, then it seemed likely to be unrelated to this case—and the clock had reached its peak around the same time we had reached the peak of the mountain, so there were about five hours left until dawn.

If Hachikuji’s child, or rather, her business[8], was business for Shinobu, then it would be ideal if Gaen-san (and the others) could draw the curtain on the gourmet vampire while she was distracted.

And with Kagenui-san still not having returned to the country yet, it was unlikely that Miss Suicidemaster would be suppressed in a violent manner… In that respect, I was thankful for Gaen-san’s pacifist nature.

“By the way, Araragi-san. Don’t you have anything you want to

say to me?”

“Hm?”

“You have that look on your face.”

Wow, even though her career was just starting, she was still a god in the end… For her to read my face, my chaos.

However, I’d decided that I wouldn’t consult her about this case. It was different from when she didn’t have her position—now that she’d become a god, I didn’t want to stick Hachikuji in a dilemma between oddities and humans.

“Ha ha. You don’t know me as well as you think you do, Araragi-san. You’ll never put me in a dilemma, because I’m always on your side, Araragi-san. As long as I’m with Araragi-san, even hell isn’t such a bad place.”

As she said those deep words of friendship, Hachikuji opened the sliding door to the main shrine, but as soon as she did so, I felt like I’d been struck by a sense of cruel betrayal by that good friend of mine.

On the floor within the main shrine, as if it was a divine object of worship that had been carefully laid to rest, the naked little girl was indeed a naked little girl, but.

The naked little girl was a mummy.

015

Some might argue that a naked little girl was a naked little girl, regardless of whether she was a mummy or not, and others might argue that naked was naked, regardless of whether she was a little girl or not—of course, some would argue that a mummy was a mummy, regardless of whether it was wearing clothes or not.

Just as a mummy was a mummy, regardless of whether it was wearing a high school uniform or a patient's gown—however, the situation had changed. We were now in the grounds of a shrine at night, within the traditional main shrine that was completely unconnected to electric lights, and that diminutive mummy seemed to fit perfectly there, as if it had been made-to-order.

The stage effects were astounding.

Rather than an oddity phenomenon, it was like I was being shown an important cultural treasure—and though I'd temporarily fallen into a panic, I was brought back to my senses by…

"S—Suicidemaster?"

A small voice that came from above me.

A whisper.

At that moment, with Oshino Shinobu calling Ononoki-chan "doll girl", and her calling Hachikuji "lost girl" even after she'd become a god that ruled over the town, I belatedly realized that it was extremely rare for her to refer to someone by name.

Suicidemaster.

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—was it?

"Wh—what a mess you've become!"

"O-oi, Shinobu. What, what did you just say?"

"Hee-yah!"

Could she tell that the mummy was her *former master*, even when it was all dried up?

Even though Shinobu had stubbornly refused to come down from my shoulders even after we reached the summit, she now placed both hands on my head as if it were a vaulting box, spread her legs out magnificently to the left and right, and jumped wide.

And, in the air, she spun twice around before landing, and then rushed up to the mummy of the naked little girl. The little girl was rushing up to the little girl.

"Whoa! Shinobu, be careful—"

Remembering the bitter experience I had faced in a shack on the side of the road to school during the daytime, I panicked and called out to her—however, what I'd feared did not come to pass.

The mummy didn't stir an inch. If I said it like that, then it

sounded completely natural, but… Hm? Instead of the difference between wearing and not wearing clothes, and instead of the difference between a high school girl and a young girl, but as a mummy itself—did this individual follow a different providence?

Perhaps I should have also drawn close to check for this mummy's pulse or breathing, but I couldn't seem to move my body very well… It felt like my body wasn't mine. It felt like I'd actually become a child seat, or even a vaulting box.

"Hachikuji…"

"I'll say this now, but it isn't like I stripped this little girl naked for the sake of Araragi-san. The mummified little girl was naked from the beginning."

Um, that wasn't what I planned on asking or anything…

"Also, she hadn't been a mummy in the beginning."

"What do you mean by that? What happened?"

After reflexively rushing up to the mummy, it seemed she hadn't decided on what she'd do next, as Shinobu had been circling the mummy aimlessly before she asked that question to Hachikuji.

"God. What exactly is happening in this town?"

The question wasn't aimed towards me, but because of Shinobu's unprecedented tone of voice, even I couldn't help but feel nervous.

Even now, the administrator of the specialists, Gaen-san, should have been looking around town in pursuit of the unidentified vampire—so why was that unidentified vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, assumed to be the culprit behind the mass creation of these mummies, sheltering away in a shrine as a mummy herself?

She's—sheltering away, right?

"……"

At any rate, there was no longer any doubt that Shinobu and I had long since diverged from Gaen-san's plans.

The prime suspect behind the mummifications had turned up as a mummy—it sounded like that old proverb, "the mummy hunter becomes a mummy", but wait. If it followed the proverb, then the next one to become a mummy would be me.

"Shinobu. What state is that mummy in? That naked little girl? I'm already kind of astonished that your progenitor who birthed and named you was actually a little girl, but that's definitely not what a vampire should look like—is she in a zombie-like condition?"

The prime suspect had become the next victim.

It was kind of like a mystery novel, maybe?

"No. If I had to say it, then this is cryptobiosis."

Shinobu responded with a careful, and marveling, voice.

Though a marvelous god was right there.

Cryptobiosis.

In other words, anabiosis.

The ultimate state of suspended animation used as an emergency measure to preserve one's life, that tardigrades, real, non-monstrous creatures said to be as immortal as vampires, used—or so I'd read in a book.

"It's not like a living corpse, but more like in critical condition… Is that why you called us here, lost girl?"

"That's right. I couldn't exactly have a clean conscience if a foreign visitor lost their life in my area of influence—as for what exactly is going on in this town, I would like to ask the same question."

That's why, for the sake of learning the truth.

Araragi-san, I would like you to procure the *medicine* that will *revive* this person—said Hachikuji.

"The medicine—what? Procure it—where?"

Is there a pharmacy in this world that would prescribe special medicine with components that would revive vampires, which are immortal by nature?

"It is not in this world. But, it is in the next world. As you are well aware."

"Th-the next world? Even if you say that I'm aware, I don't think I know what you're talking about?"

"You should be well aware, Araragi-san. After all, you visited it quite recently—it's hell."

It's the Blood Pond Hell.

That was what Hachikuji said—the Blood Pond Hell.

Indeed, it was the perfect medicinal ingredient for the vampire's condition, which neither doctors nor the hot springs of Kusatsu would cure.

Hachikuji had said something like “If I were to fall to hell with Araragi-san, then it wouldn’t be such a bad place,” but it seemed that wasn’t just figurative—it seemed that I would have to visit hell once again.

To revive the vampire in a mummified, cryptobiotic state—even though I’d thought of this vampire as the fiend going after the members of Naoetsu High’s girls’ basketball team, I couldn’t help but feel some cognitive dissonance at having to move for the sake of this vampire’s health. But it was for the sake of investigating the truth.

Even though I’d regretted that spring break so much, to think that I would mobilize to save yet another vampire on the verge of death… It’s bloody ironic, is what it is.

In the first place, just because she was discovered in the same (though not exactly the same) state as the high school girls, it didn’t mean that the doubts surrounding her—and whether or not this little girl was “D/V/S”—had been cleared up, but there was no doubt that things were getting into the height of confusion.

It had surpassed not only my hypothesis, but Gaen-san’s hypothesis as well—the question Shinobu had asked earlier was probably the same question everyone had in mind.

What exactly was happening in this town?

What sort of oddity phenomenon was this?

…Even an unprepared college freshman like me could tell that the fastest way was to ask “the person herself”.

Otherwise, even if Shinobu’s progenitor was the one responsible for the mummification of those high school girls, I certainly didn’t think I could leave this naked little girl as she was… If I didn’t clear things up, I wouldn’t be able to even apologize to Higasa-chan, who’d provided me with the list of the Naoetsu High girls’ basketball team members.

It was like the type of mystery where a necromancer-like detective called upon the spirit of the victim, but of course, this wasn’t as convenient as that.

After all, once again, I was going to hell for the sake of a little girl… And this time, for the sake of a naked little girl, I was going to the Blood Pond Hell.

“But how exactly am I supposed to descend to hell? Seeing as I’m a perfect saint, I can’t think of a way to do this.”

“If you just play around with little girls or your little sisters as usual, wouldn’t you just normally go to hell?” said Shinobu.

Even though she was sealed, because of her nature as an

oddity, she couldn't accompany me to hell.

Don't joke about something just because it's not your problem.

Well, it was her problem, too.

The vampire who's like a parent to her was on the brink of death—it seemed she wasn't able to keep up with the situation, and although she didn't give off a heavy vibe, it didn't seem like she was able to keep up her antics.

But what about Hachikuji?

Though she was originally a lost child, she was now a god. I didn't think she'd be able to accompany me like she did last time.

In other words, even though she'd said all that so happily, in the end, she wouldn't be able to act as my guide or navigation, and I'd have to fall to hell on my own—what's with it turning out like this as if there was nothing strange about it, as if it was completely ordinary?

"But anyway, good grief. I guess I have no choice but to go. To my home away from home, hell."

"I was about to fall for you a second time. Don't say something so cool. The last time you were in hell, it was only for an hour," said Shinobu.

"It's an unseasonal homecoming."

"What are you saying, for a college student still living in his parents' home?" said Hachikuji.

Harsh criticism from these girls. Especially to a guy that was about to go to hell.

"Well, putting aside how long you spent there. It's your second time, Araragi-san, so you must be used to it by now."

"I wouldn't say that… But at the time, there was a specialist that would allow me to come and go as I pleased."

Right now, what method of transportation could I use exactly? I didn't know if it would take an hour, but I at least wanted to get back before dawn.

"If you went to hell with such a carefree attitude, even the judge of the afterlife would lose face," said Hachikuji.

Despite being the originator of the idea, she sure was bashing me pretty hard.

"Well, it may be a bit artless, but what about using the same method as last time?"

"The same as last time…"

I searched my memories. Yes, it was the previous academic year, the morning of my entrance exams.

Strangely enough, it was right here, at the grounds of the Kitashirahebi Shrine—at the time, Gaen-san had, with no explanation at all, sent me off to hell with something like a surprise attack.

With Demon Blade "Kokorowatari" in hand, she'd chopped my

body up into pieces—that was the means of transportation.

I see, in that case, the original owner of that demon blade that was also known as the “Oddity Slayer” was right here—

“Eh? Huh? Then, am I going to be chopped up by Shinobu? A surprising kind of development that had never been done even during that spring break when I was seventeen?”

“Rather than a development, it’s more of an expansion plan. Of your body. Shinobu-san, if you would.”

“All right.”

Arrangements to slice me up were quickly coming into place—Shinobu opened her mouth wide and thrust her hand deep into her throat.

Though Hachikuji had mentioned it was artless, it’d been a while since I’d seen that circus trick—like a magic trick, the *oodachi* was pulled out of the little girl’s body without a sound, glowing with a mysterious light.

Demon Blade “Kokorowatari”. The Oddity Slayer.

“Huhuhu. I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to rudely beat you up like this. How dare you humiliate me by putting me in a child seat!”

“I-I thought you were happy about it! Why are you getting mad at me now!? What’s with that weird ‘huhuhu’? What happened to your usual way of laughing?”

“Revenge is a soup best served cold.”

“I thought we were at a distance where the soup wouldn’t get cold! …By the way, I’ve never actually seen you wield that sword properly… It’s a bit late to ask Gaen-san for help on this now, but are you sure you can actually chop my organs up successfully like she did?”

“Ka ka. Don’t look down on me. It’s true that not even in the movie version had I gotten the chance to, but allow me to show off my secret techniques now. Everything was for this moment. To send you off to hell!”

“Aren’t you a little too passionate about this?”

“Have a taste of the swordsmanship I honed for four hundred years! I’m warning you, this won’t just end with your organs being chopped up. My Seishiryuu has seven secret techniques—”

First Technique: “Kyouka Suigetsu”.

Second Technique: “Kachou Fuugetsu”.

Third Technique: “Hyakka Ryouran”.

Fourth Technique: “Ryuuryoku Kakou”.

Fifth Technique: “Hika Rakuyou”.

Sixth Technique: “Kinjou Tenka”.

Seventh Technique: “Rakka Rouzeki”.

“—And, unleashing the seven techniques simultaneously, Seishiryuu’s final secret technique, ‘Shichika Hachiretsu’!”

But at the moment where I wanted to retort that she’d gotten through the whole song and dance, I may have been torn to smithereens.

017

In my third year of high school, when I'd been fighting with the aftereffects of my vampirism (or perhaps fighting against it), I'd gotten rather used to the idea of dying.

In hindsight, I had relied too much on that vampiric immortality, which had remained pronounced even after I'd returned to human form. In other words, I'd been dependent on it.

I'd become *addicted to death*.

In the end, even though I'd managed to hit upon that one-in-a-million chance of returning to human form, I had found myself spontaneously turning into a full-fledged vampire, even without my blood being sucked—it was kind of like a rebound, or perhaps I was just an idiot who didn't learn his lesson.

The reason Gaen-san chopped my body up into pieces and dropped me into hell was to separate my soul from that immortal nature, that oddity nature, but thinking about it now, maybe I was about to make the same mistake again.

Just as I had grown accustomed to death.

If I ended up growing *accustomed to going to hell*—then saying that it was fine because it was my second time, or that I'm used to it… Those wouldn't just be jokes.

Ougi-chan would laugh at me, saying, "How foolish you are", while Oikura would get mad at me, saying, "You should just die".

Anyway, so this fool that didn't learn his lesson would once again reach out his hand and step foot into a tour of hell that could shatter mankind's view of life and death—

"…Huh?"

When I awoke, or perhaps when I entered into eternal sleep, I found myself in heaven.

Heaven.

Or maybe it was paradise, or the pure land, or perhaps Eden.

There were many ways to describe it, but anyway, the fantastical landscape that sprawled out before my eyes was completely different from the one I had seen when I'd last been sliced up, and it was one that I had never seen before… What in the world?

Normally, I would describe it as a beauty that could not be painted, but the scene—this landscape filled with light—looked as if I'd entered into a painting. Or, to put it another way, I had only seen such a scene before in paintings.

If I had to make use of my poor vocabulary, well, I guess I could say it was a beautiful example of Mother Nature… But the impression I got was more, "Is it okay for someone like me to be

here?" I felt really out of place.

Out of place, and just wrong.

As if I'd accidentally wandered into the jewelry area of a department store.

With rolling green plains, a mountain range with distinctive ridges far off in the distance, and not a single cloud in the beautiful blue sky—the trees were lush and ripe with fruit, and the flowers were in full, multicolored bloom.

Even the air was delicious.

I wasn't a hermit that could live off of breathing mist, but it felt like just by inhaling, I could add a hundred years to my lifespan… Although, far from extending my lifespan, wasn't I supposed to have lost my life after being cut into pieces?

Wasn't I supposed to have fallen to hell?

"Urk… So basically, instead of falling to hell, I messed up and went to heaven? Ah, jeez, this is a problem. I guess whoever's watching is watching what I do on a regular basis."

"That's exactly right. You aren't as bad of a person as you think you are."

In order to break out of my confusion and break down the current situation, I tried to calm myself down by muttering something stupid (my self-control technique—surprisingly effective), but to my surprise, even though I'd thought no one was nearby, a voice spoke from behind.

Someone caught me talking to myself!

Normally, I would've ended up writhing in shame, but the gentle voice, as clear as (or even clearer than) the air around me, calmed me down as opposed to agitating me—I turned around.

The fact that there was a naked beautiful woman there did not make me lose my cool, either.

After a naked little girl, a naked beautiful woman.

What a series of events.

However, just like how the naked little girl was a mummy, the naked beautiful woman also had a third condition—or rather, more strictly speaking, I couldn't determine if the naked beautiful woman was a true beauty or not.

Because the beauty was wearing a *demon mask*.

A demon mask… To expand it into more words, a mask with a demon's face.

An adult woman that was liberally nude, but whose face was completely hidden by a mask… After finishing high school and entering college, I'd had a hint of hope that my life would become more adult in the future, but it had proceeded to become more adult in a strange way.

Not just lewd in the way I had hoped, but erotic and grotesque in an Edogawa Ranpo sort of way.

"……"

However, was it just my imagination?

That adult woman… That masked, fully nude beauty… I felt like I'd met her before. Even though I couldn't see her face, I could see her long, long blonde hair coming out from behind her mask, and her beautiful body lines that made her seem as if she was closed in a thin robe, even if she wasn't wearing anything. I felt like I had seen her before…

"I apologize for the way I look, Araragi-sama."

Oh my.

Though I didn't say it out loud.

I wasn't sent into a panic, but I was honestly not sure how to react to the gentle voice coming from behind the mask… Was this person someone I knew?

Was that even possible, considering *where we were*?

Since she had a demon mask, maybe this was hell after all? Was she one of hell's tormentors? If you hit the books, you'll find that hell really is full of diversity, encompassing every possible variation… Among those, there might even be a hell where a tall, sexy, naked, blonde, buxom beauty wears a demon mask and tortures the dead.

"I'm embarrassed to have appeared before you wearing a mask."

She seemed more ashamed of hiding her face than of exposing her nakedness—well, I'd suspected her of being a tormentor of hell, but this beautiful woman, like the landscape that stretched out behind her, looked like a woman that had been depicted in an artistic painting, and there was not a sliver of guilt or indecency anywhere on her body.

Or rather, I even felt that this landscape had actually been made for the sake of this beautiful woman—that was how much her naked body shined.

Perhaps, in actuality, if she hadn't been wearing a demon mask, the eyes of someone like me would have been blinded by the brilliance… Ah, *is that why* she's hiding her face like this?

So that her beauty wouldn't hurt me—her *beauty*?

"P—Princess Beauty?"

"Yes. There are those that call me by that name. But while you are here, I would like it if you called me Princess Acerola."

That was what she said.

That was what she—before she was Oshino Shinobu, before she was even Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—Princess Acerola, a literal beauty who had destroyed her country with her

unparalleled physical and mental beauty—said.

That was what the beautiful woman in heaven said.

“We are in heaven, so being without clothes is more natural. It is the natural order of things—if I may be so bold as to suggest this, it would be more unnatural for me to be clothed, as you are right now, Araragi-sama. Why not undress as well?”

“Should I? All right.”

“Please do not decide to undress so readily.”

So which is it?

But it was true that, if I were to be so brazenly nude, it would make me feel wrong—but “Princess Beauty”, Princess Acerola.

I remembered.

Strictly speaking, I had never actually met this goddess before… At least not in this world, in this actual world.

I won’t exactly go into the details because it wasn’t something that actually happened, but in the period of time after I graduated from Naoetsu High and before I entered Manase University, I crossed through the looking-glass and was honored with an audience with “Princess Beauty”.

Her beauty was such that it made me want to die just by facing her—even then, we’d only spoken with a curtain between us, but I’d nearly ended up killing myself, just as the people of the kingdom she destroyed had done.

“Well… I guess you could say I am convinced. ‘Princess Beauty’… Princess Acerola, I could not possibly complain against you being a resident of heaven.”

Uh-oh. My tone of voice was already getting weird.

That made sense.

I wouldn’t be surprised if she wasn’t just a resident of heaven, but the queen of heaven.

Despite the great expanse of these plains, there was no one else in sight, so it was possible that Her Majesty had already destroyed heaven as well… Well, I was only joking, though.

Anyway, there was nothing unusual about Princess Acerola being in heaven… What was unusual was that Araragi Koyomi was here.

Just as Hachikuji and Shinobu had explicitly and implicitly asserted, I myself had decided that I would go to hell if I died—but then, what was I doing, ascending to heaven?

“That is because I invited you here, Araragi-sama.”

“Ah, I see. So it was something like that. That makes perfect sense.”

“Teehee. Oh, Araragi-sama, that wasn’t something that

should've convinced you so quickly."

It was a highly sophisticated retort accompanied by a pleasant laugh.

Considering she was going along with my antics, she wasn't just beautiful and kind, but a good person as well—but, "teehee".

It was worlds apart from that little girl who would laugh, "ka ka".

Was this person truly the predecessor to that insolent, inhuman girl?

"…Just like how I was separated from my vampiric nature and fell to hell. Princess Acerola, six hundred years ago, when you transformed into Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, did that beautiful soul of yours that 'died' end up separating and ascending to heaven?"

To force an analogy, it would be something like that.

I couldn't tell what her expression was behind the demon mask, but the naked human body was a surprisingly eloquent thing—by moving her body, Princess Acerola affirmed my guesswork without even needing to open her mouth.

Or rather, this goddess seemed to inadvertently be posing while talking—I'd heard she didn't like it herself, but it seemed that the unintentional beauty of her gestures had seeped into the marrow of her soul as well as the marrow of her bones.

I couldn't lose to her.

Time for a slightly peculiar conversation.

"However, what may have been the reason for you to so graciously invite a humble person such as myself to this place…"

"…It seems the demon mask isn't enough. Araragi-sama, please lend me your shoes."

"Okay. As you wish."

Princess Acerola took the sneakers that I respectfully offered her and put them on her feet… The naked beauty was wearing men's sneakers with a demon mask equipped.

That slight hint of discomfort brought me back to my senses.

Suddenly [俄] brought me back to myself [我].[9]

Considering the addition of that "person" radical, it was a scene that made me wonder about my status as a person.

At the very least, I didn't think heaven would grant me a visa.

"Why did you call me to heaven, Princess Acerola? I needed to visit the Blood Pond Hell to get its water, that is, its blood…"

"Instead of discussing such things, please forget everything and come with me, Araragi-sama. This is a recreation of my birthplace."

She was a good person, but she truly was a princess, going on at her own pace… She entered into a review of the landscape.

A beautiful princess's review of a beautiful landscape.

"My birthplace happens to be the first of many countries that I brought to ruin."

"……"

Countries.

The first of many—it was a weighty statement.

And, as a siren-like beauty, she was the first, and most likely, the last.

"I am not sure how to respond to that qualification. I may have to resign myself to it—not to mention, it's possible that someone among your friends could become something similar in the future."

Hm? Who could she be talking about?

If it's one of my friends with influence on the level of countries, then I can only think of Hanekawa…

"…I'm not sure if the idea of a country being destroyed by beauty really makes sense to me… Princess Acerola, are you sure those countries weren't destined for ruin anyway, even without you there?"

It may have sounded like I wasn't really thinking about it, but I couldn't keep quiet about it… There was no need to take on everything as her own responsibility—as unlimited liability.

This didn't have to do with the girls' basketball team's collective responsibility, but the princess's back was far too dainty to bear the burden of all that—however, dainty as it was, it was by no means so frail that it would break if you touched it.

I knew that very well, because she was naked.

You could tell, that back was very robust.

"Even the prosperous inevitably decay. No, every beautiful thing will die someday—is that what you wish to tell me? Araragi-sama. If that's the case, I must say that I have been too greedy in obtaining eternity by having my blood sucked by Suicidemaster."

Princess Acerola's shoulders drooped. Her beautiful shoulders.

That's right—the legend of Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster that Shinobu had told me had been quite biased, and although she had told me this and that, on and off, about the vampire's character, she had barely touched upon the specifics of how "Princess Beauty" had become "Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade"—how "Princess Beauty" had become the "iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire".

Did she perhaps do that on purpose?

Or maybe she forgot about it because it was six hundred years ago—normally, an event so important would never be forgotten, so it would usually be interpreted as her just being reluctant to speak of it… But this was Shinobu, after all, so forgetting about it was totally

possible.

She was so lax that she may have forgotten that she was once human, over the course of that long life of hers—after seeing me wishing to become human again, she'd said it had reminded her of something she hadn't thought about in a long time.

…I wonder what she was like back then?

I'd heard of the story when Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade had been enshrined as a god, just as Hachikuji was now and Sengoku had once been in the past—and when she gave that up and continued to be a demon. But what state of mind had she been in when she turned from a human into a vampire?

Had she ever thought that she wanted to be human again?

Or perhaps—had she quickly forgotten about when she was human?

As I'd mentioned earlier, I had to finish my business quickly and come back to life, so I didn't have time for a picnic with a naked beauty. But seeing as I'd suddenly gotten the chance to have a question-and-answer session, I couldn't help but want to ask a whole bunch of things.

For now, I'll try asking one thing. The most important of them all.

"Excuse me. If you do not mind, would you please deign to inform me of the size of that ample bosom of yours? Ah, this isn't for anything indecent. I simply wanted to bequeath to you a gift of lingerie."

"Araragi-sama. Asking that of a woman you've just met is not exactly praiseworthy. I do have the awareness that it was just a joke to lighten the mood, but I think you should refrain from saying things you will regret ten or even twenty years later."

She reprimanded me normally. Reprimanded by a princess. A naked princess.

When in front of a princess at the level that could make me kill myself due to being made aware of my own diminutiveness, it was less a joke to lighten the mood and more a technique for my own survival—however, I'm probably the only person that would take care to not kill themselves while in heaven.

"I—regretted it. The fact that I lived."

"……"

"I should have died. Before I even met Suicidemaster."

At first, I thought that she meant that she didn't want to be a vampire, that she wished to be human again, just like me. But when she continued, I realized that she meant the exact opposite.

"For that reason, I ended up placing a heavy, heavy burden on Suicidemaster."

This princess. She didn't regret *having her blood be sucked*.

She regretted *making her suck her blood*.

To this day, not a day has gone by that I haven't regretted my spring break when I was seventeen, when I helped and fought against vampires. But I don't think I had ever regretted it in the same way she did.

"And so—even while I knew it was an outrageous act, I couldn't help but pull you up as you were about to go to hell for her."

It seemed the conversation had circled back around.

Well, for a princess who is not only beautiful in appearance but beautiful in mentality, she surely would not display any self-centered conversation skills, even if she did go at her own pace.

"If the me that has become your partner, the me that you know, has forgotten all about the me that is right here, then that is not because the six hundred long years of her life has worn those memories away, but because she hated me, hated me to the point that it couldn't be helped."

"…Is that also regret?"

No.

She'd avoided even regret itself.

That's why—she made it as if it never happened.

She'd convinced herself that she'd been a born vampire.

If she was a vampire with the astonishing technique of physically tinkering with her brain to recover lost memories, then perhaps even the opposite was possible.

"Indeed. What I regretted, filling myself with regret to the point that I might burst, was not that I had become a vampire, but that I had been a human before that. That I had been a princess—that I had been myself."

"To the point that that chest of yours might burst—"

"Araragi-sama."

She stopped me just by calling my name—it seemed that even these rude jokes might end with me killing myself.

Now that I was in my first year of college, I wouldn't do anything let get flustered by the naked bodies of women, but at the same time, it felt like it would be even ruder to be all composed and unwavering in front of a nude woman behaving in a dignified manner.

It seemed to me like my etiquette as a gentleman was being tested.

"And so, that must be why I was separated from my soul, and this half-baked soul of mine was sent to heaven—a fitting punishment for me."

A soul where even heaven was punishment.

It was difficult for the average person to understand that

feeling, but it seemed that, just as Oshino Shinobu and I held an inseparable bond, so did Princess Acerola and Suicidemaster—so much so that they had to be separated.

When Shinobu had been reminiscing, she'd spoken of her master with such ease that it was hard to believe that they held such a fierce relationship, as if she was like a college student talking about a senior from her hometown (a common occurrence—how envious)—so, essentially, she'd forgotten why she forgot, and she'd forgotten why she wanted to forget, forgetting everything altogether.

It sounded stupid when I put it like that, but when I saw the separated Princess Acerola in front of me like this, it wasn't a laughing matter.

"I'm sure you are here because you've accepted it, and I don't have the intention, nor the qualification, to console you, but isn't that something you shouldn't be worrying about…? Because, after all, vampires are destined to suck blood—"

"I can say this only because I have been a vampire myself, but a vampire sucking blood does have a different nuance than, say, Mr. Lion or Mr. Bear attacking humans."

Mr. Lion or Mr. Bear?

Why was she acting like a fairytale princess for children for just that?

"I think it is unreasonable to talk about vampires who prey on humans in the same vein as carnivorous animals. Though I am glad to hear you say such words."

"No… I'm sorry that words are all I have."

No, maybe I'd said too much.

It was possible that I really didn't have the intention of consoling Princess Acerola, and while I was acting like I was talking to her, I was really talking to myself.

It wasn't something to worry about.

But I should still worry about it. For the rest of my life. Or perhaps, for eternity.

"However,"

said Princess Acerola.

"If those points are to be considered similar—then it would mean that I had ended up changing the *ecosystem* of endangered animals. And that is, perhaps, an even greater sin."

"……?"

What did she mean by that? Ecosystem?

Before I could question the meaning of that monologue (which I couldn't just let pass, seeing as I was more or less majoring in the sciences), she continued. "It may be too late now, but I want to help Suicidemaster, even if it means protecting an endangered species," she

declared.

She declared, beautifully.

"That will not lessen the weight of my sin, and it is possible it will only lead to my regrets worsening even further. But even so, I intend to do what I have to do."

What she has to do.

What she has to regret.

"I can no longer turn a blind eye to the present situation, and leave Suicidemaster in the state she's in."

The naked little girl.

Well, the nakedness wasn't relevant—the mummified little girl.

The mummy that had dried up so much—it was hard to even look at.

"—Basically, Princess, it wasn't that you were trying to prevent me from visiting hell in search of a cure, but that you saw me about to descend into hell, and thought, 'He isn't that bad of a person.' And then you pulled me up for the sake of saving Miss Suicidemaster, right?"

"Yes. I truly do not believe you are that bad of a person, Araragi-sama."

Even her honesty had a virtuous beauty to it.

It was to the point that I wanted to introduce her to the members of the Pretty Boy Detective Club, whom I had befriended the other day.

"If I were your friend, I think I would recommend that you take a leisurely trip to hell at another opportunity."

If the princess who destroyed countries was going to recommend a vacation like that, then it seemed I would have to reevaluate the way I lived. But in that case, I would gratefully accept her support.

If I could, I would even borrow the help of a cat (though the Araragi style of doing things was "I would borrow specifically the help of a cat"), but if it was the princess herself offering her hand, then I couldn't not kneel down and kiss her.

"You said this was a recreation of your birthplace, Princess Acerola—um, can I find a Blood Pond Hell in heaven, too? Somewhere that's fairly close by, and easy to procure from—"

"There is no Blood Pond Hell in heaven. There is none in this world, in the same way there is no place here where either me or Araragi-sama can belong."

I was told something pretty terrible.

But, well, of course… In that case, it would be the Blood Pond Heaven. I couldn't help but imagine a Blood Pond Heaven as something sumptuous and immoral.

It didn't seem heaven-like.

So, if she didn't invite me to a haven where I didn't belong to recommend a cheaper generic drug with the same effectiveness but at a lower price…

"Could it possibly be that we were off the mark this whole time? Are you warning me that ladling out a cup of medicine from the Blood Pond Hell won't be the wonder drug to revive Miss Suicidemaster like we were thinking?"

Well, it wasn't the kind of treatment you'd find in a "Family Medicine" book… It had been a suggestion from none other than Hachikuji Mayoi, not only a god, but also someone who had had experience in hell.

To put it one way, it was like folklore that had been thought up by folklore; to put it another way, I may as well have been trying to go to hell to pray for rain.

Like a meaningless sacrifice, or a sacrifice chosen by lottery…

"No, no, it is not like that at all. As a treatment for Suicidemaster in that state… Yes, it would be Ultra-C."

She'd worded things in a way a youngster like me would get… Unfortunately, there was a significant margin of error, but I was glad for her concern.

"The Blood Pond Hell, a soup simmered with the karma of people, can act as a health drink not just for Suicidemaster, but for any vampire in the world… However."

That person surely will not drink it.

She surely will not accept it.

That was what Princess Acerola asserted.

"Because she's a gourmet. An epicure, and a high-class one, at that—she will never consume anything that doesn't go along with what she wants."

When she said that, I remembered what Shinobu had told me about Suicidemaster's personality.

She would only eat the lives of whoever she killed herself.

In that way, she was quite the stoic vampire.

"The Blood Pond Hell, if you will, is a buffet of sorts, filled with the blood of people in every possible variation. Do you like buffets, Araragi-sama?"

"Huh? Well, I guess."

The buffets that I was familiar with were mainly the sweets buffets that I was taken to by my girlfriend, but the glamorous party-like atmosphere was very exciting.

In that case, perhaps I could expect a similar sort of placebo effect from the Blood Pond Hell—however.

"Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster prefers service *a la carte*,"

said Princess Acerola, continuing the analogy.

"The idea of that new god was rather flexible, and I would value it as rather original. However, in this world, there are some patients that refuse to accept rational treatment—there are some that refuse to even see a doctor."

People that wanted to die naturally, huh.

They didn't want to live long to the point of defying their fate—well, that also concerned the matter of euthanasia or death with dignity, so it wasn't something that a youngster like me could talk about lightly. But there were certainly people that thought that way.

"A youngster, you say? Please don't abandon that thought, and keep thinking about it. You already have the right to vote, after all."

And why are you so knowledgeable about the state of Japanese politics?

Is everything we do, including right now, completely transparent to heaven? In that case, does that mean that the princess knows the truth behind this incident?—I nonchalantly tried to fish for information.

"If Miss Suicidemaster is such a gourmet, or rather, such a picky eater—then she's likely to be biased towards the targets she attacks as a vampire, right?"

For example, high school girls. More specifically, the members of a high school girls' basketball team.

"I would like to ask you not to probe for information. The fact that I could arrange this point of contact with you is not exactly commendable in itself."

Oof. It was a little hard to press for information if she told me that directly.

Or rather, I was pretty embarrassed that she'd figured out I was trying to probe for information.

"No matter what, I will always be on the side of Suicidemaster. It is like testimony from a family member—please consider my words to be unreliable."

"……"

"However, it is not that I know everything about this, either… The only advice that I can give you, Araragi-sama, is that if you wish to obtain the wonder drug that will become the nectar for Suicidemaster, then instead of getting it from a drink bar with variations of blood, you should extract that blood from someone that has been carefully selected."

For example.

For example, the blood of someone like me.

With that, "Princess Beauty", the completely nude princess, raised a hand to the demon mask upon her face.

Huh? Was she going to take it off?

Why now?

“Please close your eyes.”

Being asked to do so, I finally (even though it should have been the first thing I did when I saw an adult woman in the nude) closed my eyes.

Because of her brilliance, an ordinary person would be blinded if they looked directly upon her countenance—that was how dangerous it was to look upon the beauty of “Princess Beauty”.

She knew that from the very beginning.

That’s why, even in heaven where exposing your body was the basis and nudity was the dress code, she appeared before me wearing a demon mask—so then, why was she suddenly trying to take off the mask now, without any context?

“That is, of course,” the princess said.

I couldn’t tell because I’d already shut my eyes, but she must have already taken off her mask, for the sound of her voice had become even more beautiful—that muffled sound that came from behind the mask was gone.

And that voice was extremely close.

I had no idea when she had gotten that close, to the point that I could feel her breath.

That beautiful voice was coming from a distance where our lips were almost touching each other.

“If I am still wearing a mask, then I cannot place my lips on top of yours.”

“Wha?”

“That was the reason why I asked you to close your eyes—”

I didn’t understand what Princess Acerola meant when she spoke to me in an admonishing way, and when I opened my mouth to ask what she actually meant.

She shut me up with a kiss.

019

What goes around will come around.

The fact that I had silenced Oshino Shinobu with a kiss in an abandoned building that was once a cram school had become a mere memory, but now I was reaping what I sowed by being silenced with a kiss by her predecessor, Princess Acerola, in heaven. After all this time.

I'd been hit where I least expected it.

It was a scene that I could only describe as bewildering, but at the same time, maybe I should feel honored by it… Not even the princess from mythology and fairy tales, who went around destroying nations everywhere, would have killed her people with such a beautiful kiss.

Not one you do on the back of one's hand, but a genuine, lips-on-lips kiss.

And happening in heaven, at that.

Or it could be that it had just been a wild delusion of mine (in which case, I had better rush to the hospital as soon as possible, instead of worrying that my vampire constitution might be exposed—my mind had to be in serious condition to fantasize about a naked princess with a demon mask), but, like in hell, there was no dying, living, or killing in heaven.

If there was.

It would be—*coming back to life.*

"……"

When I came to, I was back in the main shrine of Kitashirahebi Shrine—a dark indoor scene, a complete change from the scenery that I'd been seeing previously. No matter how I looked at it, it wasn't the great Mother Nature of the Middle Ages, but Japanese architecture of the present.

A scene I was quite familiar with.

However, the circumstances around me, I wasn't familiar with.

After my early return from my trip to not hell but heaven, the ones who greeted me were my *oni* partner, Oshino Shinobu, and my godly friend, Hachikuji Mayoi—and their tears.

"M-master! Master, my master! You came back!"

"A-Ara… Arara… Araragi-shan!"

The crying girl and little girl came and squeezed me in a tight hug.

What was this situation? For Hachikuji to normally flub my name like this…

"Since you were showing no signs of coming back to life,

Koyomin, these kids were worrying that they'd accidentally messed up and killed their partner or friend, up until now."

Said a voice.

Behind the bawling pair, there was the shadow of somebody who stood there, shocked—and that somebody was casually carrying, not an *oodachi*, but a *kodachi*, against her shoulder.

It was Gaen Izuko-san.

There was no one else that would call me Koyomin—she must have revived me with the Demon Blade "Yumewatari", that formed a pair with the Demon Blade "Kokorowatari".

"Although, they actually did mess up. Since Shinobu-chan comes from the position of being sealed, she couldn't break the pairing between herself and you, Koyomin, so it just ended up being a half-baked near-death experience."

So basically—I was fine up until the point where I was blown to smithereens, but afterwards, since I wasn't returning from hell, Shinobu and Hachikuji panicked and asked for help from Gaen-san?

"To be precise, they actually asked for help from Yotsugi. And she was the one who contacted me. And since I had so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so much free time, I came."

Gaen-san, are you perhaps mad?

Well, of course she'd be mad. Since they were both willing to ask for help, both Shinobu and Hachikuji probably gave all the information they had to Ononoki-chan, and by extension, Gaen-san.

At the very least, Gaen-san should now be aware that this shrine was sheltering the mummy of a little girl—Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

The ancient vampire that Gaen-san had been attempting to seize all throughout tonight… Incidentally, I had completely ignored the mission entrusted to me by Gaen-san and tried to fall to hell of my own accord.

At this point, the promise that she wouldn't get involved again until I graduated from college was most likely no longer valid… Or rather, it was a breach of trust that may as well have earned me a permanent breaking off of relations.

It was natural for her to get mad.

"I'm not mad, Koyomin. I'm hurt. I thought you'd have a little more faith in me."

That was what Gaen-san said before she returned the Demon Blade "Yumewatari" to the still-sobbing Shinobu—the sword capable of reviving oddities, complementing the sword capable of killing them.

Of course, Shinobu and Hachikuji had probably intended to use that *kodachi* to revive me, but it didn't go as well as when they

had sent me to hell—but that made sense.

After all, I hadn't fallen to hell in the first place.

I'd been sidetracked with a drastic change to my route, sent to heaven instead of hell—and that was when Hachikuji's plan fell apart.

So for me to have been revived now, Gaen-san, the onee-san who knows everything, had surely managed to grasp what sort of experience I'd undertaken—it was hard to gauge what was going through Gaen-san's mind, as she would have had to urgently interrupt her carefully planned all-nighter after receiving the request through the young girl from the girl and little girl.

It was likely a loss of face for a commander to abandon the mission she had planned.

I really felt sorry after she told me that she felt hurt—yes, when I was in high school, it felt like school was almost everything to me, but now that I'd become a college freshman and expanded my world somewhat, I'd learned that it was not only children that get hurt, but adults, as well.

Even the onee-san who knew everything wasn't Superman—after making an adult feel hurt, making a girl sad, and making a little girl cry, I was so wracked with guilt that I almost did actually want to go to hell this time.

I wondered how they must have felt while looking at my dismembered body, and I swore to myself that I would absolutely never tell them that I'd been talking to a naked beautiful woman wearing a demon mask in heaven.

The difference in elevation and temperature was really something else.

The difference in elevation between heaven and hell.

And the difference in temperature between the pond of blood and her lips.

"What's the matter, Koyomin? This onee-san is waiting for your words of apology, you know? I'm ready to forgive you, so you should really reconcile these things quickly."

Regardless of what she felt inside, she was showing a lot of generosity, quite like an adult, or perhaps even an onee-san. However.

However, I was unable to offer any words of apology, nor was I able to offer any words of comfort for Shinobu and Hachikuji—well, of course I would do those things afterward, but before that, there was something I had to do first.

Something I had to do.

If I didn't do *that*, I wouldn't be able to speak.

I picked myself off of the floor, broke away from the new god and the old demon, and turned my back to the administrator of the specialists. And I crawled over to the mummy sheltered in the main

shrine, the center of this conversation and the center of this problem.

The mummy of the naked little girl.

The gourmet vampire.

The mummy of Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—I carefully cradled that mummy's head so as not to break it, but with the force I'd used to crawl forward, I kissed the mummy with all my might.

A kiss on the lips of a mummy.

These college chapters had become rather adult.

To be precise, it wasn't a kiss, but mouth-to-mouth feeding.

I had wondered what was going on in heaven when Princess Acerola kissed me out of the blue, without any preamble—I even wondered if I had developed an elegance that could charm even a princess, and I simply hadn't realized how attractive I really was, but that wasn't it at all.

It was true that it was a thesis-like kiss to try and bring me back to life (being brought back by Demon Blade "Yumewatari" was an explanation that only applied in this world, and there needed to be an explanation in the next world—essentially, the same thing as what Teori Tadatsuru had done with me in hell), but there was yet another reason.

The princess had, of all things, entrusted it to me via mouth-to-mouth—that is, the *wonder drug*.

The medicine in place of the soup from the Blood Pond Hell.

To go even further—the food.

Though that gourmet vampire would even refuse treatment for the sake of her epicureanism, there did exist food that she would absolutely take into her mouth.

For example.

Princess Acerola's blood was the prime example.

After all, she'd already partaken in it once before—but just as heaven had no place for a Blood Pond Hell (or perhaps, no place for me to belong), neither could bloodshed occur in heaven.

So the "gift" entrusted to me by "Princess Beauty", as a further generic drug to replace blood—was saliva.

Not blood, but saliva.

However, saliva did hold the same characteristics as blood, and I had personally treated Hanekawa Tsubasa and Oikura Sodachi before, using a treatment of saliva based on a vampire's recovery powers.

You could also say it was the easiest medicine to transfer by mouth… So, for that reason, even though I was embraced by a girl, even though I was cried at by a young girl, and even though I was reprimanded by an adult, I could not open my mouth to console or apologize without first getting rid of the liquid that had filled it.

From mouth to mouth to mouth.

It was like I was mediating an indirect kiss between Princess Acerola and Suicidemaster, and I had some mixed feelings about it, but anyway, I placed a kiss upon the mummy that was way out of my strike zone.

Seriously, if it weren't for this life-saving procedure, I didn't want to play the role of this laughingstock again.

"M-my master… So your degeneracy has finally gone that far…"

Shinobu, who seemed to have stopped crying from shock, did not seem to understand that my action, which I carried out as soon as I came back to life, was a noble medical procedure—but I was eager to expel every drop of saliva that had been stored in my mouth.

I'd gotten a taste of what it felt to be a squirrel hoarding acorns in my cheek pouches… Well, what I'd really gotten a taste of was the saliva of a princess.

There was still a small amount of vampire in my composition, so it took a lot of strength to keep from swallowing it myself.

I wanted to praise myself for my impressive self-control.

If I may say so myself, as someone who had the privilege of tasting it (maybe that's why I was able to come back to life), it was a soup that would surely satisfy even the most discriminating gourmet vampire… Well, as a result, there may have been a little bit of my own saliva mixed in, but then again, I was a man that had once been a thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the future form of "Princess Beauty".

Perhaps she could think of it as a spice to enhance the flavor.

And so, the mummy, who had been force-fed the medicine by me, showed no signs of spitting it back out.

Quite literally—she drank it.

And then,

"Oh—ohh! It's kind of like that, isn't it? When you put dried *wakame* back into water—"

Though Hachikuji Mayoi's voice was still tearful, her comment seemed truly pertinent, as one would expect from the girl with a reputation for her powers of expression.

The mummy began to *regenerate*.

Dried-up skin and bones were gradually returning to youthfully dewlike skin and flesh—like an overly-CG-enhanced commercial for hair treatment, even her hair was becoming springy and shiny.

It most likely didn't have to do with the fact that she was the progenitor who birthed and named the golden-haired, golden-eyed Kisshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—but her hair was dazzlingly gold.

"How splendid—but the same thing won't work on the mummified high school girls. Because this 'reversion' is basically *vampirification*."

Gaen-san came in with her specialist-like commentary—and, as always, it was spot on. It was true that, if we used the same form of

treatment on the victims of this case, then the girls who had failed in becoming a vampire would instead become "successes", putting us in a tight spot.

That would be putting the cart before the horse.

"—Suicidemaster. So it was you, after all," muttered Shinobu to the mummy in super-recovery.

It seemed she'd decided to put aside her shock at my treatment for the time being. Although it would be nice if she could just forget about it entirely, as she did with her past self.

Even though she'd called out her name at first glance, she could still not be one hundred percent sure in that mummy state—but now that she was on the mend, it seemed she was finally convinced that it was her former vampire master.

"Though you haven't changed—that you're *still a mess*."

…? What did she mean by that?

As far as I could see, the naked little girl's mummy had finished her "reversion" to a naked little girl, without any defects—I didn't know if all vampires were like this, but she turned out to be a cute little girl, as if the mummy form she'd been in before had just been a lie. She was a cute, naked little girl.

Naturally, it was hard for me to lay my eyes on her, so I took off my jacket and covered her with it.

We weren't in paradise. This was a holy shrine.

"About six years old—I'd say? Her appearance, that is. So there are child vampires, too."

Her size was such that it would fit perfectly in a child seat.

Well, if I inferred from what Shinobu told me, this vampire had lived for almost a thousand years, so her age surely didn't correspond to her appearance.

Just as dog years are different from human years, vampire years must also be different from human years—although, I'd been under the assumption that vampires grew quickly.

If there was someone that didn't look his age, then the half-vampire vampire hunter Episode looked to be about middle or high school age, but he was only about six years old.

"I wonder if she's like a chibi jiangshi."

Yet another analogy from Hachikuji (who was also someone who didn't look her age), but to that, Shinobu said, "Nay," and shook her head harshly.

Both her appraisal and her expression were harsh.

"This little girl form was not the form that Suicidemaster was in when I first met her—hmph. Now we're both little girls, though."

"…? What does that mean…?"

Shinobu didn't seem like she wanted to speak further on the

subject, so I had no choice but to ask the person herself about it—that was why I'd revived her in the first place. However, while the body had regained its moisture, there were no signs of her opening her eyes.

Had the treatment failed?

"It'll take some time for the fluids to get from her capillaries to her brain. At this rate, it shouldn't take more than a day. Hmm—I've gotten a pretty good grasp of what's going on, now, Koyomin," said Gaen-san.

As always, she caught onto things at a terrifying rate—surely not even this onee-san had caught onto the fact that I'd been honored with a kiss from a naked beautiful woman wearing a demon mask in heaven, but I couldn't be too careful.

It wouldn't take more than a day.

In other words, it would take… until tomorrow night or so.

"Then, before this vampire—before the first suspect on my list, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, wakes up, I'll have you catch up on my end of things, too. To the point of no return."

"Eh… Please wait. So are you saying that I'm not fired yet?"

"I have more faith in you than you think I do, Koyomin. And that faith won't be broken just because you betrayed me once or twice."

It sounded like praise, but she spoke with a hint of sarcasm.

But I had no choice to content myself with it… Even that sarcasm, and even that faith that felt a little too heavy.

"Hold on. What do you mean by suspect? My old pal?"

Shinobu had been left astonished—uh oh, the fact that she'd been kept out of the loop was about to be exposed.

So Gaen-san hadn't actually explained any of that yet. It hadn't really been the time for it, but she surely wouldn't feel calm now after hearing that her old friend (old pal?) that had just escaped from the critical condition of mummification was actually a suspect in an oddity phenomenon.

"Heh."

With a cool attitude as if she understood everything from the beginning, Hachikuji folded her arms and nodded, but it seemed a bit suspicious to me.

In her own way, she was at risk of being deposed from her godly seat—it was possible that Hachikuji was the number one person in trouble in this town.

After all, Hachikuji in trouble meant that this town was in trouble…

"It seems we'll have to throw out both your feelings of not wanting to rely on Hachikuji-chan and my plan to keep Shinobu-chan

at a distance. From now on, we're going to have to band together, so let's have a lively discussion—yes, with everybody. Even including the sleeping vampire, Suicidemaster-chan."

Even including Suicidemaster?

As I was about to inquire into the mind behind this thought-provoking and unexpected statement, Gaen-san gently reined me and said, "First, a report," getting the ball rolling.

"As she was sheltered here, naturally, I was unable to find the suspect and target of our search, Suicidemaster, no matter where I looked in the town… But until I was approached by Yotsugi, it wasn't as if I hadn't found anything."

The fourth mummy had been discovered.

A mummy of a high school girl.

With the fact that it was not an achievement, but a loss—that was what Gaen-san told us.

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The fourth mummy—if you included Miss Suicidemaster's mummy in the count, that would make it the fifth mummy. But no, I think it made sense to call it the fourth mummy here.

Gaen-san was unhappy about it, but to put it coldly, there was no doubt that this was less of a development in the incident and more of a development in the investigation—because, regardless of whether she'd been found, it didn't change the fact that she'd already been turned into a mummy.

Not to mention, if the circumstances of the discovery narrowed down the timeframe of the crime to sometime tonight, didn't that mean that Suicidemaster had an established alibi?

If she was being sheltered in these holy shrine grounds, then that could also mean that these holy shrine grounds were keeping watch over her.

"The fourth victim, the fourth mummy, is Kanguu Misago-chan. Of course, she's a member of Naoetsu High's girls' basketball team, and one of the two that had 'gone missing'—so, Koyomin, your information gathering was not in vain, in the sense that we were able to link it to an early detection."

In that sense, it happened just as we expected. It wasn't exactly comforting—but we'd managed to find one whose location had been unknown, in the form of a mummy.

"Where was she found? Was she in a location even harder to find than the shack in which the third mummy and second victim, Kuchimoto-chan, was found?"

If that wasn't the case, then it was possible to infer that the crime had taken place tonight—if she had still been alive before tonight, then it meant that she had to have been mummified during the period when Suicidemaster had an alibi.

Because a mummy was something that had failed to become a vampire, there wasn't exactly an estimated time of death—she wasn't alive, but she wasn't dead, either.

However, although it was a bit strange to find it disappointing, the fourth mummy, Kanguu-chan, was in fact found in a location "harder to find than that shack".

"It was at the bottom of a reservoir. The mummy had been weighted down and submerged at the bottom of the water. Unless you were searching on the assumption that there's a high probability of a victim that hasn't been found, well, it wasn't a place that would have easily been found."

It wasn't a place that would have easily been found—a terrible

location.

I could feel the malice.

Or, rather… Even if Suicidemaster's alibi couldn't be established, "attacking a high school girl and sinking her in a reservoir" did not exactly feel like the crime of a vampire.

If the criminal had broken into her room and attacked her in her sleep, or left a signature, or anything like that, then it was still possible for me to say that it very much held an oddity-like nature… But, the bottom of a reservoir?

That was like throwing a human into the Blood Pond Hell.

Not to mention—while she was alive.

It was a huge deviation from Shinobu, or Suicidemaster as had been depicted by "Princess Beauty"—it was the spiteful, narrow, and extremely ordinary way of thinking one would *expect from a human*.

Or perhaps they had gotten some inspiration?

Influenced by Princess Acerola, who invited even a treasonous person like me to heaven in order to revive Suicidemaster, perhaps the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire was trying to provoke the theory that she wasn't the culprit?

"Of course, even though she'd been submerged in water, she didn't 'revert' or anything."

Gaen-san glanced in the direction of Suicidemaster's sleeping form—what had been placed upon her revived naked body was no longer my jacket, but instead the white clothing taken from Hachikuji's wardrobe. And that, somehow, increased her aura of death.

Well, it could be a simple seal by Gaen-san to keep her from suddenly going on a rampage when she woke up… Although, if that was the case, it would be strange that Shinobu didn't say anything in particular about her "old pal" having been sealed, simple as it was.

"…At this rate, should we assume that the last club member has also been mummified in secret somewhere?"

"It doesn't seem like there's room for optimism. It's not like it will end with the fifth victim, either."

The fifth victim—Kiseki Souwa-chan.

Right now, they were probably out using all their strength to search for her…

"If it were me, I'd bury her in the ground. To make it even harder to find her."

Hachikuji suddenly and nonchalantly unveiled her gruesome deduction—though, no matter how gruesome it was, it was a possibility that had to be considered.

"Yes. I believe that it's highly possible. Or rather, when I took Suicidemaster into my care, her situation was more or less something

like that."

"…Was she buried in the ground?" Shinobu asked doubtfully.

"In the ground, or rather, in the mountain," responded Hachikuji. "In this mountain, that is. Rather than having been buried, it's possible that she'd dug herself in on her own. Mummies can be like that, after all."

Hmm… Well, rituals such as burying oneself in the ground and becoming a mummy have been seen in many places since ancient times.

"I can't agree with that reasoning. In the first place, if a vampire wanted to hide a corpse to destroy evidence, there would be no better place to hide it than in their own belly."

It was a rather composed opinion coming from Shinobu.

Really, coming from Shinobu.

No, she seemed a little unhappy, but that may be because she was offended at having been left out of the loop so far. She didn't seem like she was particularly trying to protect Suicidemaster in any way.

The worst-case scenario—that she would take Suicidemaster's side and end up in another heated confrontation against Gaen-san and the other experts… But right now, any signs that she would do such a thing seemed virtually nonexistent. …Why?

Is it because she knew?

Knew that there was no need to cover for her—was she as convinced of Suicidemaster's innocence as her predecessor, Princess Acerola, was?

"Well, I'd like to come back and hear about the relationship between Hachikuji-chan and Suicidemaster later, but for now, I have something I want to tell Koyomin."

Gaen-san smoothly returned to the main topic—she made a great MC for someone like me who got easily distracted.

Well, I wanted to hear not just Hachikuji's opinion but also Shinobu's opinion later, but of course, those would not prove Suicidemaster's innocence by themselves.

In the first place, once we put aside the premise that bloodsucking is not a sin for vampires, there's no guarantee that the missing high school girl won't be swallowed whole when her blood is sucked.

As I thought about that…

"Something you want to tell me?" I asked, repeating her words. I didn't have any idea what she could be talking about, it seemed to have been a perfectly natural continuation for Gaen-san.

"A code,"

she said.

“Where the fourth mummy, Kanguu Misago-chan, was discovered, just like when the third mummy, Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan, was discovered, a code had been left behind—and it’s not clear if it’s what you called a living message, or if it’s the signature of the vampire.”

Aha, so that was why I hadn't been fired. That emotional-sounding reason of "faith" hadn't necessarily been a lie, but more realistically speaking, I'd been given the okay to stay in the investigation squad to handle the cryptanalysis.

Thank you, Meniko! Hooray for friends!

My strength as a human did go up from making friends!

…I wasn't sure if such a flippant change in policy was okay, but regardless, the message (or signature) that had been left behind by Kanguu-chan (or the vampire) was as follows.

"820/280/610/160"

Perfect for a mathematics major.

Well, not for me, but for Meniko, was what I meant. But it was a code made up of purely numbers, without any letters mixed in like last time.

Four numbers.

Could the fact that exactly four mummies had been discovered be some sort of key?

Did it have to do with prime numbers again? No, with all of them being even numbers, and all of them ending in zero, they definitely weren't prime numbers…

"That reminds me, if you're considering this a signature, then I believe Suicidemaster doesn't even know what prime numbers are."

And neither do I, said Shinobu brusquely from beside me—I wasn't exactly thrilled by her cavalier attitude, but it was certainly a far cry from the time with Shishirui Seishirou, when she had refused to even join the discussion.

Could this also be considered a change in policy?

Thinking about it, since Shinobu was no longer a pure oddity, change was now something that was allowed for her—it was no longer something that would cause her to be extinguished.

It wasn't so strange to think that the little girl had experienced some growth after the battle over the Demon Blade "Kokorowatari" against Shishirui Seishirou, with whom she shared a history—and though I didn't know what she thought about what I'd just thought, but Gaen-san spoke up.

"Yep. The truth is, I didn't suspect Suicidemaster as much as I might have implied. It was just that, with a code like that being found, we certainly couldn't ignore her as the prime suspect," she said, agreeing to what Shinobu said.

It was a retraction of her previous statement that I'd thought was unthinkable for Gaen-san—or no, I guess it wasn't. In the first

place, Gaen-san had never actually told me that Suicidemaster was a suspect.

It was most likely that she didn't have the conviction.

"Then, what sort of vampires are the other suspects assumed to be like?"

The culprit was undoubtedly a vampire, at least.

And even though she was more like the dregs of a vampire, Shinobu was still technically a potential suspect.

"I won't name anybody specific, but I can think of a few beings that might want to pin the crime on Suicidemaster."

"Pin—the crime?"

No.

Whether or not it's a crime for vampires to suck blood was a different matter entirely—was it wrong for lions to eat people?

It was a theme I'd touched upon in my conversation with Princess Acerola.

"If they could set up the renowned Suicidemaster as the imaginary culprit, then they'll be able to safely go around sucking blood—there could be a vampire that thinks that way."

For that purpose, they went and turned Suicidemaster herself into a mummy?

Then, assuming "B777Q" was indeed a signature, then that signature was a fake signature? Then Suicidemaster wouldn't have to know what prime numbers were for things to make sense.

Because it was a fake signature left by someone else.

"That goes for if it was a living message, too. Let's say the vampire had went up to the high school girls and claimed, 'I am the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster'—then the probability that the victims would want to leave that name behind is pretty high, wouldn't you say?"

"Mm…"

She was right. I should've put more thought into it than just being satisfied at cracking the code… Not that I had cracked the code with my own power to begin with.

However, when she put it that way, I couldn't deny that it felt like a bit of a letdown. Because then, for what reason had I been keeping watch over Shinobu?

"Well, in the end, I got to descend to hell again, so it's fine."

"As if that could be fine!" retorted Shinobu.

Well, to be precise, I'd actually ascended to heaven, but things would get more convoluted if I brought that up now—it was hard to figure out how exactly I would tell Shinobu about "Princess Beauty".

So at present, the story was that I had taken some of the soup from the Blood Pond Hell into my mouth, and somehow managed to

revive a second time—not the princess's saliva.

Well, whether it was heaven or hell, with the way I made Shinobu and Hachikuji cry, it really wasn't acceptable to die in such a casual, easygoing way.

It was something that Ougi-chan had harshly pointed out—continuing to die and revive was certainly risky. Above risk, and beyond risk.

I could stray off the path again.

As a punishment to myself, let's swear to go and visit Oikura at her new lodgings.

"However, unlike Shinobu-chan, Suicidemaster is not a vampire that has been certified as harmless, so even if she turns out to be innocent in this case, she will still be targeted by specialists for extermination. Well, I'm a part of the moderate faction, so I won't do something like that—but it was fortunate that I didn't call Episode over for this case."

Episode, huh.

It was true that, if Episode had been called to this town like with the case of Shishirui Seishirou, then it could have turned into a reproduction of last spring break—in that sense, it was Gaen-san's usual foresight, but there was one thing we shouldn't forget.

With that foresight of hers, Gaen-san had called for Kagenui-san.

For that violent *onmyouji*, the term "moderate" was even less appropriate than the term "gothic lolita"—the only human weapon in the industry, capable of beating even immortal oddities to death.

"That isn't really something I want to think about."

Gaen-san crossed her arms behind her head, speaking as if escaping from reality.

"However, when push comes to shove, I'm sure her power—her violence—will be necessary in the end. If I could go and call Tadatsuru now, then maybe he could cancel her out, but unfortunately he's always off on his own."

In any case, it seemed there was no change in the fact that the safest course of action was to resolve the matter before Kagenui-san arrived.

But anyway… The code.

If it was the victim that had left it, then was Kanguu-chan also a fan of Ellery Queen? Well, with two people belonging to the same club, it wasn't impossible for them to have a sense of solidarity in reading the same mystery author…

Though it was hard to believe they would leave such an elaborate dying message (living message) unless they were huge fans—if this code were to be solved, would it also end up being "D/V/S",

or something pointing to “Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster”?

Or did it lead to a completely different answer… I couldn’t say anything yet. But if possible, I wanted to get as much data as I could for decoding before relying on Meniko again.

“Under what circumstances was this code discovered? You said that Kanguu-chan’s mummy was found submerged in a reservoir… How exactly had the code been left in the water?”

Had she written it with her finger at the bottom? Something like that would probably have gotten messed up while pulling the mummy out of the water…

There do exist writing implements that can be used in water, but I didn’t think a high school girl would use those normally like they would with flashcards.

“As expected, Koyomin, you sure are discerning. As expected of a pro of high school girls.”

“I’m not a pro of high school girls. Huh, what exactly did I discern?”

“The message was indeed left with a tool that a high school girl would normally use… Her cell phone.”

“Her cell phone? No, but in the water—”

Wait.

My cell phone wasn’t like that, but there did exist some tough models of cell phones that were completely waterproof—they were fine even when submerged in water, and as long as there was no problem with water pressure, they would be just as functional underwater as they were on land.

“The code was displayed on the screen. At first, I thought she was trying to make a call for help at the bottom of the water, and ran out of power before she could dial, but it didn’t make sense as a telephone number, and they weren’t area codes—so, I wondered if it was a message. A code.”

“820/280/610/160”

Well, it definitely seemed more like a code than a telephone number.

Hachikuji must have been reminded of it from the cell phone, because she spoke up.

“In Gaen-san’s time, didn’t you and your friends use pagers to send each other these kinds of codes?” she said.

It was a bit uncalled-for.

Even though I’d thought the same, I’d kept my mouth shut considering Gaen-san’s age was unknown.

“Ha ha ha. Even in my time, pagers were no longer being used. Hachikuji-chan, please do not forget that whether or not you can continue to be a god depends on how far I am willing to go.”

“Eep!”

Hachikuji went pale at the influential person exerting her influence. She was weak to adversity.

This part of Hachikuji meant she could never become like Chinou-chan.

“W-wait a minute, Araragi-san. If you put it like that, it makes it sound like I started out after that loser…”

“If you really want to act like a senpai, you should make way for the next generation. Isn’t it about time for the elderly to step aside?”

“Elderly? Out of everyone in the world, you’re the last person I’d like to hear that from, Araragi-san. You could stand to learn a bit from the gallant natures of the Nonsense User or Risuka-chan.”

“Risuka-chan hasn’t even been completed yet!”

“Rumor has it that the final volume will be published in seventeen years.”

Wasn’t that still a ways off, then?

Anyway, putting aside the judging of people based on whether they came first or not… It was true that it was a pager-like code—but in that case, it meant it wasn’t mathematics’ time to shine. It could be a play on words.

Meniko was pretty good with puns, too, so she surely wouldn’t have a tough time with this, but if there was a problem, it would be that Meniko was not in possession of any communication tools like cell phones or smartphones, despite coming from my time.

If I wanted to ask for her help, I’d have to wait until first period tomorrow—even if I wanted to meet her in person, I couldn’t just go and barge in on her in the middle of the night, unlike with Oikura.

I wanted to remain a good friend, and in order to preserve that friendship, I had to draw the line.

“Understood, Gaen-san. I’ll try what I can on my own, but I believe something like this should be decoded by the same person in order to provide uniform results, so would it be possible for you to wait until tomorrow morning for the solution?”

Manase University’s first period started at 8 am, and Meniko was going to be there 15 minutes early. Assuming that I skip the lecture itself, we could expect to make progress by 9 in the morning.

“Is your new friend a clock or what? But, well, I’ll be counting on you. I may know everything, but codes are a weakness of mine. Stuff like that did appear fairly often in oddity stories, but it was really Oshino-kun that was good at those—but the fact that she left the code on her cell phone is much stronger data than the fact that she left a code behind.”

Because, unlike those of the previous victims, we were able to get past the lock—said Gaen-san with a smile. It was a smile that showed the true potential of the authority of cell phones (and not pagers).

"With this, I've been able to get my hands on the victim's personal information—since I had to come rushing all the way over here to help you, Koyomin, I haven't had the chance to analyze it yet, but I'm expecting lots of information."

She was putting pressure on me every time.

But still, while I knew it was necessary, it didn't really feel right or ethical to search through someone's cell phone. And I couldn't honestly say I was looking forward to having to peek further into the darkness of the girls' basketball team.

"Anyway, my detailed disclosure of information ends here. Next, shall we hear the long-awaited details from Hachikuji-chan?"

I doubted that the information that Gaen-san held had truly been fully disclosed, but I decided to let it go and turned to face Hachikuji.

I was interested in the code, but there was something I was even more interested in—how exactly had the mummified little girl ended up under the custody of the god of this town?

What did she mean when she said that Suicidemaster's mummy had been buried in the mountain?—emergency lifesaving had been the utmost priority when we first arrived here, so there were still tons of things I didn't get.

If she didn't explain this now, I would have gone to heaven in vain.

"It was partly because it was an emergency, but also because I'd been told not to talk about it, so I'd put off explaining it to Araragi-san… But I guess I can't keep quiet when you're all looking at me like this."

I shall renounce my right to remain silent and exercise my right to speak out.

That was what the new god said, with a bit of a sigh—as if such a right exists.

“It was about one week ago. As always, I’d been doing my daily routine of training under the waterfall…

“Hm? Don’t lie from the very beginning, you say?

“How rude, Araragi-san. You’ll never catch me in a lie or in twintails.

“Although I am in twintails.

“It’s true that I was lying about training under the waterfall, but the very beginning, when I said that it was one week ago, was not a lie.

“The truth is that I was zoning out on the shrine grounds. Zoning out is my daily routine, you see.

“But then, I sensed an oddity that passed through the barrier that protects the town—I’m sure I don’t need to explain, but just in case, if you happened to forget, I’ll give you a quick overview. This barrier had originally been set up by Oshino Ougi-san to repel Oshino Meme-san or Kagenui Yozuru-san from this town, before being recycled.

“Thinking about it now, setting up barriers is a strong point of those two, so using a barrier to keep them out is the kind of irony you would expect from Oshino Ougi-san. But it was a good thing that we could recycle it and use it for peace in this town—of course, it was not me, but the resourcefulness of the outstanding specialist over there, Gaen Izuko, that was responsible.

“Even if you tell me not to suck up to influential people…

“In my case, it’s my life that’s at stake—or perhaps it’s not my life, but my duty? Anyway, as it turned out, the oddity that came at that time was none other than the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

“Don’t make a face as though I should flub it a little. Do you think I should say something like, sorry, I didn’t flub it?

“Well, I had no intention of letting down my guard just because she *looked to be a child of six years old*, but I didn’t sense any threats coming from her. Or rather, when Suicidemaster landed on shrine grounds, she showed such concern that she went out of her way to avoid me.

“And because she was going out of her way to avoid me, she messed up her landing and broke into pieces—ahahaha.

“It’s not a laughing matter, you say? Yes, you’re right. After all, she ended up dying once then and there.

“Although, since she was a vampire, she quickly regenerated.

“Somehow or other, it seems I’ve died again—was what she

said. I wonder if that was her pet saying, something like a catchphrase?

"It was like she really was the death-certain vampire, and it wasn't a bluff or just putting on airs, because she seemed used to death—is that what vampires' immortal natures are like?

"Anyway, when she revived, she told me about the reason for her visit—she might have mistaken me for immigration control or something. You know. I kind of give off that impression, don't you think?

"So, when I asked her about the purpose of her visit to Japan in a formal manner, she said, 'I came to see my old friend, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade'—although, before she even said it, I'd already guessed that she was someone related to Shinobu-san after seeing that brilliant blond hair.

"However, after the case with Shishirui Seishirou-san, I couldn't just greet her with a warm welcome just because she knew Shinobu-san. Just as Gaen-san said, vampires are threatening oddities in their own right.

"But, considering I was originally the lost child of a snail, it would have been strange for me to deny her entry to the country just because she was an oddity.

"With Suicidemaster having come to meet her 'old pal', I didn't have any particular reason to turn her away.

"It didn't seem as though she was lying.

"More than anything, after being asked for directions, I couldn't just not show her the way. Because that's the kind of god I am—my role is to act as a guide for lost children.

"Without mentioning Shinobu-san's current state, I sent her off—and after that, I believed I'd been able to help realize their heartwarming reunion.

"But, one week later. Today.

"Well, it's already yesterday.

"I ended up discovering the visitor that had turned into a mummy and been cruelly buried in the mountain."

Afterwards, it would have led to her panicking and calling us over through Ononoki-chan.

It had been a bit of a mystery why Ononoki-chan had suddenly appeared at that point, but apparently, when Ononoki-chan had made a mistake and been in trouble, Hachikuji had come to help her out, so this was returning the favor… It was hard to believe that Ononoki-chan could make a mistake at all, but it was hard to delve into that in front of Gaen-san.

"I see, I see. So that ancient vampire had already come to this town one week ago. Breaking through the barrier… Hmm."

Gaen-san spoke as if slowly digesting Hachikuji's words.

"Yes. For more details, please read the short story 'Mayoi Welcome'. It's a story that's particularly difficult to obtain, but I believe the short stories will be collected in a book in seventeen years, so please wait warmly."

"I can't wait that long!"

It's a case we need to settle by today or tomorrow!

Or rather, if we were still going to be doing stuff like this seventeen years from now, that in itself was a problem. We needed to seriously consider our future.

"Well, that was all within the range of my expectations. Including the reason for her visit," said Gaen-san.

Indeed.

Though there was a difference in class, Suicidemaster and Shishirui Seishirou had indeed come for the same reason, with Shinobu as the cause, or perhaps the incentive—no.

That might not be it.

In Shishirui Seishirou's case, the reason he'd come to see Shinobu had been related to the Demon Blade "Kokorowatari"—but in Suicidemaster's case, the reason she'd come to see Shinobu hadn't come up in Hachikuji's story earlier.

For six hundred years, they had never once met, so why now? After all this time?

Without that clarity, we couldn't be too careful… From what I could remember of my conversation with Princess Acerola, there didn't seem to be a twisted reason like with Shishirui Seishirou, though…

However, even though she hadn't come to hurt Shinobu, there was still a possibility that she was planning on pulling Shinobu back into the fold and conspiring with her on something untoward.

Presumably, even this was all "within the range of her

expectations", but Gaen-san continued like so.

"However, I'm more interested in the fact that she—*broke through the barrier*. Well, I didn't think she'd be able to come to this town without Hachikuji knowing, but… How should I put it? I never expected that she would come right in from the front."

Being a vampire, there would be plenty of ways to enter, like turning into mist or hiding in the shadows—said Gaen-san.

"'Tis true that landing on top of a mountain from such a big jump is the horseplay of a show-off—the height of folly," said Shinobu.

And whose mouth was that coming from?

Do you want to be shut up?

Not to mention that Suicidemaster had been sensible enough to try and avoid Hachikuji (putting aside how we should judge the fact she had died once as a result)—and because of those evasive actions, it seemed Hachikuji had placed a certain amount of faith in her and allowed her entry to the town.

"But if you ask me, Shinobu-chan, such a flashy and flamboyant way of appearing is what makes Suicidemaster, Suicidemaster, and that's what I've heard from the rumors as well. But, as for the reason she managed to pass through the barrier—"

Huh? Wasn't that just because she was a powerful vampire? It didn't seem like it would be too hard for her to break it down by force, whether it was a barrier or hell itself.

"Well, perhaps. That's something we can figure out by questioning the person herself—we won't let the special remedy you brought back from the next world after your solitary struggle go to waste, Koyomin. We'll make sure to do a proper interrogation."

By saying "the next world" instead of "hell", it could've technically included heaven, making me feel as if she'd completely seen through me—it really felt like she was the senior of Oshino, who'd been a master at seeing through people.

"If we were to make a hypothesis based on what's most likely at this point, it would mean that Suicidemaster was sent off by Hachikuji-chan and headed out for the town, but before meeting Shinobu-chan, she began to cause all these incidents *for some reason*—and then she turned into a mummy *for some reason*. How perplexing."

"How perplexing indeed."

It really was.

It was probably best to partition the two "for some reason"s and think of them separately—thinking of the former from an ecological standpoint, then illogical as it was to attack only members of the girls' basketball team, if you simply thought of it as a vampire's picky eating, we could ignore that question.

The problem was the second question.

Why would the former master, who was supposed to be here to meet Shinobu, be found buried in the ground? And, if it weren't for Hachikuji, the god who rules over this town, and if it weren't for Hachikuji, who lives on this mountain, then it would have been a cover-up that would not have been so easily discovered.

They could have pinned the crime on her—

For that reason, they had her die—

And with the dying messages that would pique the interest of mystery maniacs… In that case, was the true culprit a vampire that was a fan of mystery novels?

That in itself seemed like picky eating, a strange kind of favoritism.

"It's true that the only way to find out is to talk to the person herself. I have grown considerably curious, as well. It was already a shock to hear that she'd still been alive—but, my master. If you're willing to change the plot of this mystery drama into a courtroom drama, then I would like to act as the defense for the accused."

The little girl was using words she had just recently learned.

Act as the defense—Oshino Shinobu would stand on Suicidemaster's side.

Rather than being within the range of expectation, it was more like the situation that I'd feared, but before either I or Gaen-san could say anything—"After all, this fellow is not the culprit. I believe I was about to tell you this earlier, my master."

Shinobu continued.

"Right now, this fellow cannot consume anything but the food known as me."

The gourmet vampire's diet, unbalanced towards service *a la carte* rather than buffets, held more weight than Shinobu had suggested, as well as more misery than Princess Acerola had described.

It wasn't that she chose to only eat food that tasted good.

It was that she *could not eat* anything but food that tasted good.

It was a behavior that went completely beyond stoicism, ingrained to the point that it was impossible to fix. Suicidemaster, who had set her sights on "Princess Beauty", had starved to death many times as a result.

"I don't remember much about those times anymore, but I could tell that Suicidemaster was growing weaker and weaker right before my very eyes—she was transforming into a little girl. Regressing into the form of a very cute little girl—even though she had originally been a fierce, bewitching, older woman, older than me at my complete form."

"Older woman—"

"Koyomin. The fact that you looked at me in response to the term 'older woman' is something this onee-san won't forget when she does become an older woman."

It was a bit of an emotional reaction from the onee-san with a usually laid-back personality.

"If you want, Koyomin, now that you're nineteen. Do you want me to use my tricks to completely crush everything you hold dear? Do you want me to utterly destroy your interpersonal relationships, Koyomin?"

Scary! You don't need to get that mad.

What's wrong with an older woman?

Especially a fierce, bewitching, older woman.

"As far as I can tell, she's regressed even further since I saw her last—as expected. After taking in the blood of 'Princess Beauty', the blood of another human being would end up being thinner than water."

I surmised that the reason Shinobu's memories were hazy was because "Princess Beauty" had been separated from her and had ascended to heaven—but I knew what she was saying.

I had been made to carry only her saliva, not her blood, but even with that, I didn't know what would have happened if I had swallowed it—

"If Suicidemaster had been conscious, she surely would not have even drank the wondrous blood from the Blood Pond Hell,

either.”

Shinobu had said the same thing as Princess Acerola, but in fact, I didn’t think the medicine from the Blood Pond Hell would even have worked.

At the very least, that was what the princess had predicted.

The princess, who had driven her, the picky eater, towards anorexia—had said she’d altered the ecosystem.

The ecosystem—the thanatosystem.

It was like how dogs, who had originally been carnivores, had turned into omnivores after living with humans—or like koalas, who became able to eat the poisonous eucalyptus trees—or pandas, who only eat bamboo, which has low nutritional value.

“Hm…? But wait a minute. Would the blood from the Blood Pond Hell have suited Suicidemaster’s taste, even if she wasn’t conscious…? Could the blood that my master fed to Suicidemaster perhaps have been…?”

Uh-oh.

Shinobu was starting to be perceptive in a way she hadn’t been before—even Hachikuji, who’d been the one to come up with that treatment, seemed to make a face as if saying, “That’s right, isn’t it?”

I guess I had no choice. This wasn’t the time to be worrying about timing—in order to reinforce Shinobu’s theory, it was time to jump in and talk about my post-death experience.

“What are you talking about, Shinobu-chan! There’s no way Koyomin would lie about something like that, to his eternal partner Shinobu-chan and close friend Hachikuji-chan! Or are you implying that Koyomin is trying to deceive you two!?”

Gaen-san interrupted with quite the unnecessary and exaggerated follow-up—please act more detached about these things, I’m begging you.

I’d only stayed quiet because I missed the timing to speak, but it was quickly becoming an established fact that I was intentionally deceiving them.

Don’t force me to be indebted to you!

“That’s true.” “I suppose that’s true.”

They had more faith in me than I was expecting.

Faith was coming from all sides.

Well, it would mean having to bring up Hachikuji’s mistake, plus, even if the right timing were to come along, the story of meeting Shinobu’s predecessor wasn’t something I could tell easily…

Shinobu got back to her main point.

“Therefore, I believed that she would have long since perished by now, but I suppose she’s made it this far thanks to the quality of my blood. I’m surprised that she’s still alive and well, even though her

form has become smaller and younger—and so, I cannot think for a moment that Suicidemaster is going around the town binge drinking the blood of high school girls."

If I had to decide what the most unreliable thing in the world was, it would be Shinobu's assertions, but as for this particular assertion, it had a certain persuasiveness to it.

Despite the unavoidable fact that there weren't very many witnesses who could testify to the events of six hundred years ago, even Gaen-san seemed to agree.

"I see. Well, that's testimony worth taking into account," she said, nodding.

Nodding without a whiff of animosity. What a laid-back onee-san.

"The master of the 'Castle of Corpses', Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—in contrast to her notoriety, she's a peculiar vampire with not many of her victims being heard of, even in rumors. That unbalanced peculiarity was what made her so notorious—but I feel like I understand the reason now. The food that suited her taste—the food that fell victim to her—it was just too rare."

But there wasn't enough evidence to deny the possibility that her rare food had ended up being Japanese high school girls, so the suspicion on Suicidemaster hadn't been completely cleared yet.

At least until we heard directly from her.

"'There are two reasons why you can't eat something. Because you like it, and because you hate it'—that's what they say."

"You're acting like that's some oft-said cliche, but Hachikuji, whose words are those?"

"They're my words."

"Of course."

You were more looking forward to saying "They're my words", weren't you.

"You can say the same thing in reverse, too. 'There are two reasons why you want to eat something. Because you like it, and because you hate it'—Hachikuji-chan's words."

"Wow! You're going to give me the credit? Gaen-sama, you are a god!"

You're the one who's a god.

As expected from the head of a group of specialists full of eccentrics and weirdos, her mind control techniques had reached a level where she could take control of a god.

However, whether or not Suicidemaster was being set up as the culprit behind the serial bloodsucking incidents, Shinobu's testimony had created an unexpected new possibility.

The progenitor who had birthed and named her—the death-

prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire—why, after all this time, after six hundred years, had she come to visit the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire?

After starving and becoming weak.

After reaching her limit.

Could she have come to feed on her ‘old pal’, the only food she could eat?

Afterwards, we greeted the sunrise with no particular progress having been made—no report came to Gaen-san about the discovery of the fifth mummy, Kiseki Souwa-chan, and neither did any report about the discovery of a 'true culprit' that wasn't Suicidemaster.

If there was any consolation, it would be that we also hadn't received any reports of other, unexpected victims being discovered, or of Gaen-san's collaborators being attacked, either—so the investigation was back to square one.

"The sun may have risen, but Suicidemaster will most likely completely recover by nightfall, as expected. Until then, this onee-san will come up with a new plan of action based on the newly discovered information… But nevertheless, during the day, it'll be the same as yesterday. Gather as much information as we can."

"I'll be in charge of the living message left by Kanguu-chan."

"The living message maybe left behind by Kanguu-chan, or the signature maybe left behind by the culprit, or the diversion maybe left behind by the culprit while pretending to be Suicidemaster, that is. In other words, in charge of the code—meanwhile, I'll be analyzing the cell phone that we found that code in. I'll be taking a look into the darkness of these girls and their club activities."

"Please take care that you don't get swallowed up by that darkness."

It wasn't the kind of advice you would give to an adult who's seen the best and the worst of life, but I couldn't help but say it—well, there's no way Gaen-san was thinking something so cute and pure as the thought that "all children are cute and pure".

"I may be a little late in doing so, but I will go and patrol around the town. After all, I'm the god of lost children, and the god of walks."

Allow me to assist in the investigation from the point of view of a god, said Hachikuji—she probably was just looking forward to saying "the point of view of a god", but she probably couldn't act neutral anymore after the suggestion that the oddity she let in from overseas was potentially causing harm to the town.

Rather than being in a dilemma between humans and oddities, it was more like having Hachikuji work as the ferryman between humans and oddities.

Up until now, everyone's assignments had turned out as expected, but then,

"During the day, I'll be going to sleep,"

said Shinobu.

“When it becomes night, I shall cooperate. It will probably be better if I were there when we listen to Suicidemaster’s story—if you want, I can take charge of the interrogation.”

“—Then, I’ll leave it to you.”

Gaen-san did not bother questioning why the sealed oddity was being so cooperative—and that was good.

Rather, she approved the appointment with a terse reply before Shinobu could change her mind—when interrogating a vampire under suspicion, the presence of her old acquaintance was the best we could ask for.

However, the possibility that I’d thought of just a moment ago —the possibility that Suicidemaster had come to eat Shinobu. With that in mind, wouldn’t it be dangerous for Shinobu to be there…?

In any case, I couldn’t go against the leader’s decision. Don’t forget, Shinobu and Hachikuji and I were ‘Team Failure’, after all.

If we made any more blunders, we could end up having our harmless certification be revoked, or deposed from the godly seat—if “Team Failure” sounded bad, then let’s say we’re “Team Probation”.

If we didn’t show Gaen-san what we were capable of, it would be just as dangerous.

Well, I doubted that Shinobu offered to help Gaen-san because of such fussy calculations (since Shinobu couldn’t plot things anyway) …

It was a delicate matter, so I decided to talk to her about it when we were alone.

“Then, I’m about to head straight to school without dropping by at home, but where should we meet afterwards? Since we’re talking about deciphering the code, it might be better to explain it directly, like yesterday.”

If it turned out to be a code where I’d need diagrams or figures to explain it, then it would certainly be hard to explain it verbally over the phone.

“Then, let’s meet up at Naoetsu General Hospital. I’ll introduce you to the fourth mummy, Kanguu Misago-chan.”

It wasn’t like we could shake hands even if she were to be introduced to me, but still, I suppose it would be good to see her directly…

If I only thought of victims of oddity phenomena in terms of numbers, I would be no better than that con man who only thinks in terms of money.

“With four victims having been discovered, it’s getting tougher to manipulate the flow of information. Even this onee-san that knows everything has limits to her barrier that can hide everything. The incident has gotten convoluted, but no matter what the truth is, we’re

going to have to settle this by tonight."

It's gonna be a ruckus—said Gaen-san.

But the reason for hurrying to resolve this issue was more than just because it would be a ruckus… There was the sense of justice of wanting to not have any more victims, but it was more than that.

If, by tomorrow morning, the series of incidents had not been resolved.

Kagenui-san would arrive.

I'm sorry to say this after having been the one to call her in, but if I'd known in advance that the famous Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster was involved, then I wouldn't have called that living bomb here at all—was what Gaen-san had lamented, which I recalled as I gripped the steering wheel of my New Beetle, heading for Manase University.

"That lady must have been looking for an opportunity to bring back her cute junior from the North Pole, is what I feel," said Shinobu, appearing in the passenger seat.

She appeared in the child seat that had been placed there.

Since Shinobu was a mere shadow of a former vampire, while she wasn't exactly at her best in the sunlight, it wasn't like it could completely stop her in her tracks… She wasn't strictly nocturnal, just more of a night person.

With a strong will, she was capable of appearing even in the daytime… In other words, if she was out and about in the daytime, that means she currently had a strong will.

"What is it, Shinobu. Weren't you asleep?"

I tried probing into her intentions.

"I'll go to sleep soon. Before that, I figured that you had something you wanted to ask me, my master."

She'd seen right through me, as if this were a competition with Gaen-san.

No, perhaps this was our empathic link—from our master-servant relationship.

Our deeply entrenched relationship.

"Well, I was just thinking that you were being pretty cooperative. Cooperative not just towards me, but towards Gaen-san as well. Even though you refused to cooperate last time."

Rather than just refusing to cooperate, she'd gone and run away. Completely rebellious—I'd already explained that this time she'd been kept out of the loop because Gaen-san had been wary of her doing the same thing again.

"What's with the change of heart? Can I just understand it as you having grown up a bit since that incident? Grown up to the point that I shouldn't have bought that child seat?"

"The size was never right from the beginning! It feels like my entire body is being bound like feet. Yes, well, it's fine to think of it like that. I've grown up a bit. I learned that, at that time, I should've just listened to you and that administrator from the very beginning."

I'd be happy if it was true, and it probably wasn't all lies, but

something didn't quite add up.

"You and I are in the same boat, two hearts beating as one. With you having changed, I've changed a bit as well. The me that had a high schooler as a partner and the me that had a college student as a partner may as well be different people."

"It's true that before, you used to sit in the front basket of my bicycle, and now you're sitting in a child seat."

"You can't really call that growth… No, well, that's fine, too."

Was it fine?

It did feel like she'd mellowed out a little by not being stubborn at these times, but for whatever reason it felt like she'd gotten harder to handle.

Like she was just nodding along.

Sloppily.

"Hey, Shinobu. You're not thinking about anything weird, right?"

"Weird? Of course I am. Do you think there'd be someone who could preserve their sanity after being placed in a child seat when they're 599 years old?"

"You're not thinking about something admirable like, getting yourself eaten by Suicidemaster or anything?"

Just as I had done during that spring break when I was seventeen.

Or perhaps, just as Princess Acerola had done for Suicidemaster at the time, six hundred years ago—

"Ka ka. I was wondering what you were going to say, but that came as a shock. I've never even thought about doing something like that, right up until this very moment—you're the one thinking about something weird, my master. What I was thinking was, if we put you in girls' clothes and fed you to Suicidemaster, would that make her better, or would it just make her regress further, becoming around four years old?"

"Why would she turn four years old after eating me. And don't put me in girls' clothes. Once was enough."

"Enough to become a habit?"

"I haven't done it once since then!"

Without that onee-san to keep things on track, the conversation kept straying.

Such sloppy chatter.

"As soon as that code pointed to Suicidemaster's involvement, you should've relied on me from the beginning. If you did that, then we might have been able to settle this last night. You'd better reflect on yourself—you've forgotten your promise not to keep secrets about oddities from me."

“If my memory serves me right, that promise was something I made to my girlfriend…”

Hmm.

It was hard to keep the conversation going smoothly if she kept making me laugh… Well, it wasn’t just Shinobu’s fault.

It was at least better than when she didn’t even talk to me, but after having had so many meaningless conversations with Shinobu, it was difficult to have a serious conversation with her.

If I were to speak without any fear of being misunderstood—if Shinobu were to follow the precedent set by me and decide to be eaten by Suicidemaster, who was reaching the limit of being a little girl, then I might even say that I’d prefer if she betrayed humans and joined the culprit of the serial bloodsucking incidents. But it was nearly impossible to say that without any fear of being misunderstood.

I wasn’t as fastidious as I was in high school, either.

I couldn’t just dismiss the act of a vampire attacking a human as something that was evil—I could no longer tell a dying vampire to die for eating people, as I did back then.

After getting to tolerate the existence of Ononoki-chan, a line like that would make me grit my teeth, if not make me want to pull my tongue out.

It was the assertion of a seventeen-year-old youth that could only have said it at that time, at that timing—but if you were to ask if I had a different answer now, then that wasn’t the case either.

Hanekawa, who’d been seventeen years old at the time, had said that being afraid of vampires eating humans was like saying you felt sorry for cows or pigs—the middle-aged Oshino had said it was the same as being disillusioned by a kitty eating a mouse.

Well, that was probably true.

However, Princess Acerola’s opinion in heaven added another layer to it—she’d said that the relativization of talking about vampires as the same as lions or bears was not quite correct.

To arrive at such a state of mind… It was impossible for a college freshman like me.

Compared to those days, I’d become much more mature, for better or for worse, but I would never become a sage or a hero.

It would probably be impossible in my lifetime.

“Well, don’t worry about it too much, Shinobu. When Suicidemaster-chan wakes up, the first thing we can do is recommend Mister Donut. She might get a taste for sweets.”

“That in itself would destroy the ecosystem.”

“I know, why don’t we ask Oikura to make some home cooking? Oikura’s lived by herself for a long time, so her cooking is surprisingly really good. Even Hitagi-san was jealous.”

"Wasn't that tsundere girl actually jealous about something else?"

She shrewdly pointed it out. How piercing.

Well, Shinobu had gotten hooked on Mister Donut after she'd become a vampire no longer… But, wasn't it worth trying, as long as it didn't do any harm?

Even koalas eating the highly toxic eucalyptus leaves was a matter of survival—though perhaps different from humans eating fugu fish.

"I bet the fugu fish was shocked, though. It was probably thinking, 'Eh? There are people who would eat me!?' …Well, you've made me think that I'd like to try that crazy girl's home cooking someday. Really, any dish prepared by a monster might be palatable to an oddity such as myself."

You're being described in a pretty cruel way, my childhood friend.

You've been recognized by the king of oddities as a real monster.

"…Even if Suicidemaster wasn't the culprit behind the serial bloodsucking this time, and even if she successfully regains consciousness this evening, will she eventually end up getting exterminated by the specialists? Even if she's not certified harmless, she doesn't have a bounty on her head like you, right?"

"That may be the case, but if we put that violent *onmyouji* in the mix, then it becomes a different story. That girl wields her fist with justice."

"…If you insist, I can steer the conversation towards certifying Suicidemaster as harmless, you know?"

If I gave up on that promise of noninterference until my college graduation, then I was sure Gaen-san would be willing to listen to that level of recklessness—of course, that would only work as long as she was completely innocent in the current case.

I knew it wasn't exactly easy to certify an oddity as harmless, but if you asked me, there was room for it this time—after all, Suicidemaster has caused almost no damage since she took "Princess Beauty" as her thrall six hundred years ago.

That was the difference between her and Shishirui Seishirou, who'd been causing actual damage to the town in real time… At that point, that had just been a completely different risk level from lions and bears and cows and pigs and kitties, without even needing Princess Acerola to point it out for me.

It was like a virus on the level of a biohazard.

It needed to be addressed before it could be discussed.

In contrast, it wasn't clear how much damage that gourmet

vampire had caused in the past, but it was six hundred years ago.

According to Japan's Criminal Procedure Code, the statute of limitations for any murder case had certainly passed—not that there was any law in this world that governed crimes committed six hundred years ago.

It wasn't a situation where we had no choice but to exterminate her.

And this was just a coincidence, but like Shinobu, she met the condition that she was in the form of a little girl—at least on the surface, didn't she meet all the requirements to be certified as harmless?

"Ka ka. Do you want to try sealing Suicidemaster in your shadow, too? If you're going to rear two little girls in your shadow, then finally your fervent desire to create a harem would no longer be a dream."

Don't call it my fervent desire.

The Araragi Harem will never exist, past, present, and future—and don't say that I'd be rearing little girls.

If I'm not careful with my words, I could say this situation was parasitic.

"Give up. That one is not a human-turned-vampire like me, but a genuine, born vampire. Just as you have tried to remain human, she will surely try to remain a vampire—and to a true vampire, being certified as harmless would be an insult."

To be feared, shunned, and dreaded—that was an oddity.

Uncertain and odd.

"More importantly, there's something else that I absolutely needed to tell you, my master. For that reason, I put up with my drowsiness and came to fit myself tightly in this child seat."

"Thinking about it, if you really didn't like it, you could've easily just appeared in the back seat. But what is it, the thing you absolutely needed to tell me?"

"Well," said Shinobu, before pausing.

And then, she spoke, as if having resolved herself.

"When we interrogate Suicidemaster, I would like to show off in front of my old pal for our reunion after six hundred years. So for just this one night, instead of me being your slave, can we have it so that you are acting as my slave?"

“Kanbaru. Do you mind becoming a slave for tonight? Also, lend me your house.”

“All right!”

Second slave, secured.

“Oikura. Tonight, become my slave, and cook for me.”

“Don’t think you’ll be able to live until tonight.”

Third slave, failed to secure.

The reason for that failure was most likely because I’d been in a hurry and said “my slave”… Well, it wasn’t like I could tell her to become the slave of a golden-haired, golden-eyed girl.

And because of her connections with Gaen-san, I couldn’t exactly get Kanbaru fully involved in this either, so renting her house for one night should be good enough.

As the “citadel” of the king of oddities.

I’d heard yesterday that her grandparents were out on a trip, so Kanbaru could stay over at Higasa-chan’s house or even Karen’s room in the Araragi house and hold a pajama party there, while I was allowed to do whatever I liked in the meantime.

I knew it made me sound like an outlaw, but it was a decision I couldn’t avoid—the only building I could think of in this town that could serve as a vampire’s stronghold was Kanbaru’s mansion.

Just as the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, had once taken up residence in the “Castle of Corpses”, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, needed a building of suitable pedigree in which to take up residence.

It was fairly Japanese-style for a castle—or rather it was just a Japanese mansion—but hopefully, this being Suicidemaster’s first visit to Japan, she wouldn’t be able to differentiate between castles and mansions in Japan… Not that I, a Japanese person, could.

“But no, I didn’t say that just because I wanted to show off. If Suicidemaster were to learn that her former thrall who she came to visit had been rendered harmless and sealed in the shadow of a pervert—nay, human—she may close herself off entirely. We won’t be able to hear a single shred of information. In the worst case, you might even be killed. Would you be fine with that?”

“No, I wouldn’t, but…”

“In that case, become my slave again like you were in last year’s spring break, and prepare a castle and a banquet. To make my reign more convincing. If you can secure two or three more fake thralls, then that would be great.”

The slave sealed in my shadow stuck out her chest in pride and ordered me as such from the child seat.

Erm…

"So basically, you want to greet your old pal with a master-servant relationship in that sort of fashion?"

"Fashion is important in hospitality. I'm pretty strict on fashion. Like a Parisienne."

"No, rather than a Parisienne, you're more like a putting-on-airs-ienne. Respectfully speaking, Shinobu. Wouldn't a petty trick like this just be found out immediately…"

"Oh, you're already getting into it. 'Respectfully speaking', you say? Ka ka, you're an expert at acting like a slave already! Have you done this before? Wait, of course you have! Ka ka, keep it up for the real thing!"

With a loud laugh as if she'd already gotten accustomed to being the master, Shinobu sunk back into the shadows… It almost looked like she was assimilating with the child seat.

What a mess. She'd appeared as if she was going to listen to my concerns, but then she just said whatever she wanted to—however, as soon as I parked my New Beetle in the parking lot, before I went inside, it was then that I called Kanbaru, who'd been in the middle of her morning run, and Oikura, who'd been indulging in her slumber at her lodgings.

Kanbaru had eagerly agreed (it was scary how eager she was, but I decided to call her back and discuss it properly, as well as other things), while Oikura had refused (if I left her alone, she'd probably call me back, so at that point, I'll more or less apologize from the bottom of my heart… and ask for her home cooking separately).

Well, Shinobu putting on airs was the same as always.

I almost wanted to tell her to be more show-offy towards me, but considering the way she was cooperating for this case, I couldn't bluntly refuse that honesty… I had better properly inform Gaen-san about this, too.

Thinking about it, Kanbaru was the "niece of that Gaen-san", but in reverse, Gaen-san was the "aunt of that Kanbaru". What if Gaen-san casually went, "I'll do it, too! Let me be a slave, too!" after I went to her with our plans?… I didn't want to see Gaen-san like that.

What an odd family they were.

On the other hand, even though my parents were ordinary, upright public servants, why had all their children turned out like that?

Speaking of which, the fact that only the members of the girls' basketball team of Naoetsu High were being attacked could be rephrased as "only Kanbaru's juniors were being attacked", so maybe

it was a good idea to think about things with her as the focal point.

Even if the gourmet Suicidemaster were only able to dine on "Princess Beauty", Kanbaru Suruga was the daughter (in other words, the direct descendant) of Gaen Tooe, who's practically talked about as if she were a legend—so for the club members that were under her influence, the possibility of them being targeted is…

Although, in that case, maybe Kanbaru herself would be targeted? Actually, it was fairly possible that that was the case—and if so, then using Kanbaru's house as a meeting place wasn't a bad idea, if only to see Suicidemaster's reaction, but Kanbaru herself should probably be kept far away.

That was what ran through my mind as I wandered around the campus of Manase University to kill time, having arrived earlier than expected (it was a fairly expansive university, and I still hadn't seen all of the campus yet. Supposedly, it would take over four years to check out all of the facilities—what was this, the British Museum?), but once it got close to 7:45 am, I knocked on the door to the lecture hall for my international linguistics class.

Although it was called "linguistics", it was different from classes on foreign languages in that it put languages from all over the world, both famous and unknown, on equal footing and compared them in detail. Ultimately, an unproductive course with no destination in sight—there were many incomprehensible courses like this in college.

But I liked that sort of incomprehensible stuff. Could this be Ougi-chan's influence?

It was a liberal arts course unusual for someone in the mathematics department to take, and it was hard to say that the course was particularly popular even taking into account how early in the morning it was, but for Meniko, whose goal was to work with codes in the future, there was no way she couldn't take this course—well, for her, international linguistics probably wasn't even an "incomprehensible course" (in exchange, Meniko was bad with normal foreign language study).

"Hola. Araragi-chan, you're eaaarly. How diligent of youuu."

"I dunno about being called early when you're here in your seat before me. Hola."

Not to mention, I planned on skipping class after this. Unfortunately (or not), today's lecture hadn't been canceled.

It seemed I'd have to borrow Meniko's notes another day—the number of favors I was asking her was increasing. Someday, I'd better do something for her in return.

I bumped fists with Meniko and sat down next to her, and then asked, "Do you mind if I asked you to decipher another code?",

showing her the sequence of numbers that I had displayed on my cell phone.

"Hmm. Hmm, hmm?"

A normal person, after being asked to solve codes like these two days in a row, would find it strange and ask for my intentions before even trying, but this was Hamukai Meniko—she couldn't not solve a code that was put before her.

It was a difficult personality, but I liked that about her… It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but neither I nor my proud network of friends from high school were people that moved without some reason or purpose.

Even Hanekawa and Oshino.

And even the violent *onmyouji* Kagenui-san that was heading towards this town was actually a person of reason—she moved according to her own, unique logic.

As a result, there had been a time when I'd thought that people were just like that, but after becoming friends with Meniko, I came to learn that there were people who weren't like that—I'd been enlightened.

Meniko also seemed to be rather interested in the fact that I was (in a rough estimate) rather logical about things, so I suppose it was a mutual thing.

In order to maintain this relationship, I didn't dare introduce Meniko to any of my other connections, such as Oikura, even by mistake—of course, I had absolutely no intention of breaking off my connection with Oikura, who I had reconnected with after entering university, but as for her… Rather than our connection being broken off, it could be more like she herself would snap.

"A cell phone, huh. Was the code recorded on a cell phone?"

"Yep. Although I don't know if that holds any meaning…"

"That's truuue. These days, cell phones are like a part of our brains now, aren't theeey? Some people criticize the fact that when you go on a trip, you end up looking at the scenery through the small screen of your smartphone, but looking at something with the camera of your smartphone is basically the same as looking at it with your own eyes, riiight? Maybe when people complain about train passengers playing with their cell phones, it's a sign that they've failed to pair their phones with themseeelves?"

I hadn't exactly mastered the use of a cell phone myself, so it was hard for me to wholeheartedly agree, but, well, it wasn't like I didn't understand what she was saying.

"Anyway, this time it's only numbers, huh. Hm. I did solve it, buuut."

"Already? You're really the one that's early to things, aren't

you. The truth is, I didn't have the slightest idea."

It wasn't like I didn't feel helpless when delegating the whole thing to Meniko, so I'd thought that I'd challenge it on my own in the period of time before I took it to her, but I'd spent most of that time on Shinobu's matter.

"It doesn't seem like putting it on a phone and not on paper really maaattered? But numbers are easy to make into a code, aren't theeey. Languages can vary from region to region, depending on grammar and culture, but numbers are worldwiiide. No matter where in the universe you are, one plus one is two, and a prime number is a prime number, riiight?"

"That's not actually the case. For example, in Nepalese, the representations for '1' and '9' look similar, so when a Japanese person sees them, the math wouldn't add up at a glance. The logic would look completely wrong. Also, it's only in Japan where people use the '正' kanji to count to five, and for someone like me, the little horizontal bar used to distinguish a '7' from a '1' is enough to make me not think of it as a '7'".

"I see. For someone like me, a '7' with a horizontal bar looks kind of like the kanji for seven [七] upside down, so I end up getting those confuuused. So you're above me when it comes to that, huh, Araragi-chaaan."

There wasn't really an above or a below in this exchange, but aah, I wanted to have a conversation like this.

I suddenly realized.

When Shinobu—when Princess Acerola, as "Princess Beauty"—went about destroying countries… When she was a human, did she feel the same way as this when she met a vampire?

Even though it was a relationship of eat or be eaten.

The interpretation that they were vampire and thrall, or master and slave, was at odds with the lighthearted way in which she spoke of her as an "old pal".

She had said that she'd reflected from that time with Shishirui Seishirou, so I'd interpreted it as the master-slave relationship having been reversed, but what if it wasn't that? What if Suicidemaster really was just a "friend" to Shinobu?

Like, for example, Kanbaru and Higasa-chan.

According to Hachikuji, Suicidemaster had called Shinobu a friend as well.

A friend, huh.

There had been a fiercely determined class representative who had declared, "If I can't die for someone, I wouldn't call that person a friend". But what if Shinobu wanted to meet Suicidemaster with that in mind?

Did I have the qualification to stop her?

Talking about qualifications at this point was what made me, me—regret may always come too late, but logic always took precedence. If I ultimately acted upon my emotions, then I would most likely act too late to a disgusting extent.

I should learn a bit from my new friend.

What I wanted was not qualifications, but qualities.

“Hmm. Araragi-chan, what’s the matter? Thinking about something?”

“No, I’m trying hard not to think about something. So, what’s the answer to the code?”

“Like yesterday, I managed to solve it, but it’s a dead-end that isn’t really refreshiiing. Even though I managed to decode it, it just leaves me stressed agaaain. But it ended up being letters of the alphabet agaaain.”

“Alphabet—then, ‘D/V/S’?”

“No～ope. This time, it’s ‘F/C’.”

“F/C”?

"If 'F/C' are also initials, I wonder if there's someone from the girls' basketball team who has those initials," said Gaen-san, the human representative of logic, after hearing my report.

We were once again in Naoetsu General Hospital, in yet another hospital room different from the three we'd been in earlier—the hospital room where Kanguu Misago-chan's mummy had been put up.

"I wonder if the message was left on a cell phone to hint at that. Since they had matching straps with their initials."

"Aah… That's right, they did have those," I said.

In that sense, I would've had more hints to decipher it than Meniko did.

It wasn't really a contest, but I did find it a bit frustrating.

"By the way, Kanguu-chan also had a strap. Since she's Kanguu Misago, it was 'M K'."

"Eh? But wait, Gaen-san. Wouldn't that mean that the vampire that we're looking for is actually among the members of the girls' basketball team?"

If, not the dying message, but the living message was indicating a specific member's initials, and Suicidemaster was being falsely accused of a crime, then that would be it.

"F C".

"Not necessarily. It could be that Kanguu-chan, in a hazy state of mind, was just trying to write the name of a friend she thought of. Or it's an act of deception to make us think that way. In other words, diversionary tactics by Suicidemaster."

A vampire trying to blame a human for their vampirism—it seemed a little narrow-minded, almost pitiful at that, and not at all in line with the image of a vampire. Well, if we can consider the possibility that the crime is being pinned on Suicidemaster, why can't we consider the opposite?

Taking it to extremes, it was even possible now that this was a diversionary tactic to make us think that everything was fabricated, like a deduction in a *honkaku* mystery.

Us people of logic.

"You're right. It would be too unexpected a truth for there to be a vampire among the club members."

"I don't remember explicitly denying that possibility. You can't say for sure that there aren't more oddities like you, Koyomin, that put on an air of innocence and casually attend school, right?"

"Again with the jokes."

And this was a bad joke, at that.

The phrasing of “air of innocence” felt like biting words.

“It’s not entirely a joke, though. Well, this is just a brute force through all the possibilities at the moment. Like a canvassing operation done by throwing more people at the problem. It’s true that, as a result of last night’s events, the suspicion placed on Suicidemaster has faded. ‘F C’ seems like it would be fairly rare for initials, so I’m sure we’ll be able to narrow it down to just a few girls out of the hundred on the basketball team…”

As she spoke, Gaen-san began flipping through the register of names borrowed from Higasa-chan, beginning her check. I’d promised not to make any copies of it, so it was the original document.

“For reference, do you mind if I ask, Koyomin? About how the code was deciphered. It’s possible that the method can also provide a hint for us.”

“Understood. However, I don’t think it’ll be very relevant.”

“I’d like to hear it anyway. I may not exactly be a sciences person, but it’s not like I hate number puzzles. It’s a great way to exercise the mind and relax.”

Relax?

Putting aside exercising the mind… She didn’t really look like it, but was Gaen-san actually stressed right now? With this incident taking longer than expected, Kagenui-san drawing closer to the town with every moment, and my betrayal that must not be forgotten, well, there were plenty of things that could be cause for concern.

Well, if revealing the trick is somehow relaxing, then I’ll gladly do so.

It’s atonement for my infidelity.

“However, this code ended up not being a number puzzle. It had nothing to do with prime numbers, either—though it’s still in the sciences, it was not mathematics, but the field of natural sciences.”

“Natural sciences? If we’re talking about fields, in middle school, they’d divide the natural sciences into the ‘first field’ for physics and chemistry, and the ‘second field’ for biology and geology.”

“In that respect, it would be the first field—Celsius and Fahrenheit.”

In other words, temperature notation.

Like numbers, temperature was the same throughout the world, or perhaps even throughout the universe, and high temperatures were high, low temperatures were low, and absolute zero was absolute zero—but temperature wasn’t notated in the same way everywhere. The units differed.

And that difference was Celsius and Fahrenheit.

“Ah—that’s why it’s ‘F’ and ‘C’?”

As expected of a logical person, she caught on fast. After speaking, Gaen-san flipped the register shut—it seemed she'd finished checking it all.

She was even fast at reading.

"But how does '820/280/610/160' become Celsius and Fahrenheit? Although, since Celsius is 'C' and Fahrenheit is 'F', perhaps I should ask how it becomes Fahrenheit and Celsius."

"For both Celsius and Fahrenheit, a '°' is placed in the top right direction to denote 'degrees'. In the same place where you would write an exponent."

"Do an explanation like that for a science major. I got it just from you saying 'in the top right direction'—don't go off in a completely different direction, Koyomin. And?"

"We look at the '0' in the code and interpret it as a '°'—basically, the '0' in '820', the '0' in '280', the '0' in '610', and the '0' in '160', all the zeros at the end of the numbers, should not be taken as numbers but as symbols. Then, '820/280/610/160' becomes '82°/28°/61°/16°'."

"Aha. Highest and lowest temperatures, huh?"

That was exactly it.

The code that had been left behind was showing yesterday's temperature, represented in both Celsius and Fahrenheit—just like the Rosetta Stone, which could be described as the originator of cryptanalysis.

However, the essential letters of the alphabet were missing —"F" and "C".

"That's why, 'F/C' becomes the deciphered text to the code. Oh, but if they're initials, you can't really call that a text. But I see. It's amazing that someone could come up with something like that."

"Yes. Checking the daily high and low temperatures may be natural for an athletic person, but even then, I don't think they would have been able to come up with that in their hazy state of mind."

"No, my intention was to praise your friend, Koyomin."

It would be a bit troublesome if you show too much interest in her.

If you point your finger at her.

This was entirely my own self-interest, but I wanted to settle this case before I needed to ask for help with a third code…

But after relying on Hachikuji and getting Shinobu's cooperation and borrowing Kanbaru's house, I'd strayed pretty far from what I'd originally intended, so maybe next time I'd just give up and go to Ougi-chan for help with the cryptanalysis… Although, that girl likes to be befuddling, so she definitely wouldn't just give me the answer straight up like Meniko.

She was also a person of logic. A mysterious form of logic.

But anyway, let's return to the main subject.

For the sake of protecting Meniko, and for the sake of resolving this case.

"But anyway, how many people in the girls' basketball team have the initials 'F C'? Although we'd probably need to check whether that girl has a strap or not…"

Since the first mummy, Harimaze Kie-chan, didn't have a strap on her phone, it wasn't a given that everyone had a matching strap. Perhaps, within the club, that small level of resistance against peer pressure was allowed.

"There were as many as zero people."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Sorry, that was a weird way to put it. Zero. There were none, is what I meant. Girls with 'F C' as their initials, that is."

"Have you looked for the reverse order? You know, when representing the name of a Japanese person, there's the pattern of 'first/last name' and 'last/first name'."

"Of course. There were none like that, either."

Could Meniko's solution have been wrong?

No, there was no way.

"I wonder if we should expand the range of possibilities. Should we include the third-years that have already retired as candidates?"

"Umm…"

It wasn't impossible to ask Higasa-chan through Kanbaru for a list of the OG members, but I wasn't sure. If we expanded it that far, it felt like the possibilities would be endless.

It didn't seem too productive to force the solution into the initials 'F C' and look for a person that matched, either… Rare as the initials might be, it wasn't like there was nobody with those initials.

"We did figure out that the victims were members of the girls' basketball team using the straps as the hint, but like with 'D/V/S', maybe there's a famous vampire with those initials?"

"The vampires here are from overseas, after all. It's normal to add a middle name… It's unnatural to have initials with just two letters."

"Is that so…"

I'd ended up bothering Meniko with this (though she'd been happy about it) and I'd ended up skipping class (though I probably would have skipped class anyway), but it didn't end up being that much of a hint… Well, even Oshino had said that fieldwork was a cycle of futility.

It was important not to dwell on it.

"By the way, Gaen-san. You don't seem to be in that good of a mood, so is it possible that you received more unpleasant news while I was out?"

"Hm? Did it seem that way to you? I was trying to act calm about it, but this onee-san that knows everything must be losing face to receive your concern, Koyomin. Even though I want to be an onee-san you can always rely on."

"No, no. Gaen-san, you're always an older woman that I can rely on…"

"I'm not trying to be a dependable older woman. No, but anyway, Koyomin. Your worries were right on the mark. The contents of a high school girl's cell phone weren't something we should have

looked at."

And the fact that it hasn't produced any good results so far is nearly breaking my heart, said Gaen-san as she laid eyes upon the mummy on the bed—the owner of the cell phone, Kanguu Misago-chan.

Having been made to wear a patient gown and laid to rest on the bed… I didn't want to say I was getting familiar with the sight, but I was getting used to it.

When humans become nothing but skin and bones, it's hard to distinguish between them—their height becomes ambiguous when laid down, and since they were in a sports club, their hair was fairly short, so it was hard to distinguish them that way, too.

Kanbaru had also had a short haircut when she'd been active… Don't tell me it wasn't just because they were in a sports club, but because they were following after Kanbaru…?

Everyone doing the same thing… Hm?

"Even so, this onee-san won't be surprised any more. Seriously, after being shown the ugly side of human relations, I won't even be scared of vampires."

"Being shown? Gaen-san, you're the one who went and looked at it yourself."

"And I have nothing to say in response to that. They say you're not supposed to check your partner's phone, and that's completely true. If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

What was in that phone, exactly?

Honestly, if she said it like that, it made me even more curious… However, it probably was better to not ask. For the sake of respecting their privacy, and for the sake of my own health… If Gaen-san ended up like that, I might even end up hospitalized as a result.

And if it wasn't producing any good results, then all the more reason not to.

"Well, I suppose the girls' basketball team is pretty unique. If this sort of thing was commonplace… Well, it's not something I want to think about, as an adult. Their club activities are certainly strange. It felt like they were bullying themselves."

"But aren't all athletic clubs more or less like that? Even more so if you're a powerhouse."

Or rather, a former powerhouse. In the case of Naoetsu High.

Of course, that may have intensified that athletic mindset…

"Mm. I've always had a commander-like nature since I was in high school, but even then, I was still pretty incompatible with those sports-minded people."

"So there was a time when you were a high school girl, Gaen-

san."

"It's not like this onee-san was always an onee-san from the moment she was born. Or an older woman."

"That wasn't what I meant… But even so, the hardest person to imagine as a high school girl would probably be Kagenui-san."

She didn't seem like she would be in the liberal arts or the sciences, or in a cultural club or a sports club… What kind of high school girl would she have been?

"That girl was actually a surprisingly diligent student. Although I only knew her as a college student, not a high school student. She's the only one from that trio to graduate without dropping out."

Is that so.

Human beings really couldn't be described one-sidedly, huh.

"Oh nooo. While I carelessly stepped into a colony of high school girls and got my feet stuck in a murky, bottomless swamp, Kagenui will probably arriiive!"

Even if you lament the word "arriiive" all cutely like that, that in itself seemed more lamentable.

Please remain a reliable older woman.

"It may be fine for me to think this way, but Gaen-san, aren't you being a little too cautious regarding your junior? She may be a bit uncontrollable, but it's not like she completely ignores the orders you give her, right?"

In the first place, Kagenui-san was coming all the way back from the North Pole because she was called by Gaen-san—plus, if she were truly uncontrollable, she would've ignored any sort of harmless certification and gotten rid of Shinobu and me.

Though she was infinitely violent, that was just a matter of the way she did things, and it should be possible to talk things out—she was a person of logic, too.

"That's right. It's true that, if I explain the circumstances, she might understand the reasoning behind why it's not necessary to exterminate Suicidemaster. It might even be possible to certify her as harmless, with how much of a little girl she's become."

Even while stuck in a bottomless swamp of high school girls, it seemed she'd long since considered the things I'd thought of, with the way she spoke.

"Yes. In fact, as soon as I'd heard that Suicidemaster had broken through Hachikuji-chan's *mayoi-ushi* barrier, those thoughts had already crossed my mind. It wasn't that Suicidemaster had broken through the barrier with brute force, but simply that she had been weakened to the point that the barrier didn't even react."

"……"

Was that even possible?

It sounded pretty painful and distressing, considering that she was the progenitor who birthed and named the legendary oddity.

“Even in that state, she should still be able to suck the blood of high school girls, so just by being in this town, nothing has changed regarding her being the prime suspect. However, the reason she became a mummy might not be because she was attacked by someone, but because she’d weakened to the point that she entered cryptobiosis by herself.”

“In that case, would that mean she was the one to bury herself in the mountain?”

“Yes, it would be safer in the dirt, after all. The cryptobiotic-sleep, hibernation-sleep, dozing-sleep vampire. In that case, perhaps she was attempting to make her way back to Hachikuji-chan who was in charge of immigration control, and collapsed along the way. Well, we’re still just brute forcing the possibilities here—the strongest possibility is still that she grew so hungry that she attacked a high school girl, but for now, we can apply the principle of innocent until proven guilty. But the problem is, that won’t work on Kagenui.”

“…Why is that?”

She sure was stubborn in a weird way.

In a sense, she was pretty laid-back to even put her faith in someone like me, but right now, Gaen-san was being weirdly obstinate in regards to Kagenui-san.

“Well, this is just between us, but they share a bit of a past. The problem at hand, Suicidemaster, and the even bigger problem, Kagenui.”

“The problem—and the bigger problem.”

“Even if Suicidemaster happened to not be the culprit for this case, and even if it’s possible for her to be certified as harmless after not having harmed a human for the past six hundred years—even then, they share a past that makes it impossible to stop Kagenui. Though justice is the only thing that can put that unorthodox *onmyouji* in check, she’s very likely to move out of a personal grudge for this time alone.”

G—grudge?

That bundle of justice?

“If I make the wrong move, I may find myself having to excommunicate yet another junior. And I don’t want to do that.”

Kagenui-san's personal grudge probably wasn't something that other people should be prying into, so let's return to the main subject. Although the main subject was a ghost story with intense pressure. But anyway, back to the main subject.

The risk of intruding into her private life had been clearly demonstrated, and Gaen-san, who had hinted at it, didn't dare tell me the details of her past—perhaps she'd let it slip after being embroiled in the high school girls' darkness.

Speaking of being embroiled, it seemed that the reason Gaen-san associated the initials "F C" with the members of the girls' basketball team was not only because of the alphabet strap, but because she'd looked into the darkness of the club displayed on Kanguu Misago-chan's cell phone and had been influenced by it (it seemed she even considered the possibility that, in her dazed state, Kanguu-chan thought she could pin the *crime* on a team member that she had some friction with). But in the register, there was no one with those initials—and, as long as there was no initial for a middle name included, it likely wasn't the vampire's signature, either.

Before expanding our reach to the OG girls, one more possibility came to my mind.

"What if these aren't initials, but an abbreviation for something in English?"

"Abbreviation? …In other words, something other than a person's name?"

Normally, Gaen-san would have come up with something in an instant, but at the moment, she'd been caught up in the murky mires of those high school girls… And it could be even more damaging to her as an adult.

I've learned that the private life of others is nothing but poison.

"It probably isn't 'franchise (FC)'—then maybe it's something like 'football club (FC)'?"

It seemed appropriate.

First a basketball team, now a football club.

It also wasn't impossible to interpret it as a franchise of making vampire thralls, forced as it was—but there was no need to twist it that much.

But before we went to Naoetsu High's soccer team, we couldn't forget the other organization in that high school that we should consider.

"'Fan club (FC)'."

“Hm?”

“There was something like that. In the past—well, it wasn’t that far in the past—an unofficial fan club for the superstar Kanbaru Suruga.”

It was an organization separate from the girls’ basketball team, yet was an organization that was strongly influenced by Kanbaru, in a way different from the girls’ basketball team.

It was something that came to mind after thinking that all the mummies’ hairstyles were the same—let’s see, as I recall, that fan club’s name was “Kanbaru Soeurs”?

“What’s that? Is it something like the Rukawa Kaede Imperial Guard?”

“Exactly. But somehow they ended up getting involved with me and I forced them into disbanding—”

“That’s something really scary you’re saying as just an introduction, Koyomin. Forced them into disbanding. You really are a delinquent like the rumors say, aren’tcha?”

“I think the remnants of that fan club could be related to this case.”

As much as the hypothesis that there was a vampire among the girls’ basketball team members was incredible to believe, the possibility that there was a vampire mixed in with Kanbaru Suruga’s fan club was just as ridiculous.

But we weren’t in a situation where we could afford not to consider ridiculous possibilities just because they were ridiculous.

“That’s a fact that this onee-san that knows everything didn’t exactly need to know. Ah, yes, but my dear sister had a cheerleading squad like that when she was in high school, too.”

“It doesn’t seem like it will have much of a connection, but I suppose I should do something now that I’ve thought of it. She wasn’t a member of the fan club herself, but my little sister is pretty close with that organization, so I’ll look into it just a teeny bit.”

“Your little sister?”

I looked at Gaen-san’s clouded expression.

“My little sister (the bigger one),” I amended.

After hearing that, Gaen-san seemed to relax, smiling.

“You mean Karen-chan. Okay, do as you see fit. But, out of concern—from this old lady’s point of view—please don’t bring Tsukihi-chan into this. Of course, Koyomin, you were originally the one who said you didn’t want to cause trouble for your family, but even discounting the thing with Yozuru, things that go well just don’t go well when Tsukihi-chan is involved.”

She’s talking about you in a pretty amazing way, my little sister (the smaller one).

"And, I apologize for the late report, but Shinobu laid out some conditions for her cooperation in Suicidemaster's interrogation."

I presented an outline of the master-servant reversal to Gaen-san. Even though the plan seemed like it would be laughable regardless of the time, place, or occasion…

"Right, that sounds good."

I received the commander's approval.

Of course, she didn't say anything like "I'll do it, too! Let me be a slave, too!"

"Although, rather than an interrogation, it's practically an undercover operation at this point—but if Suicidemaster mistakenly sees that Shinobu-chan is doing well in this country, then she might end up chattering away without any caution."

Mistakenly. Well, she would certainly be mistaken.

Rather than "doing well", she'd been on the verge of being exterminated, on the verge of being killed, and on the verge of death, and in the end failed to die, turned into a little girl, and then ended up sealed in a teenager's shadow.

At any rate, seeing as I'd gotten the go-ahead to put the plan into action, it was inevitable—I wasn't sure if I could pull off the part of a slave, but I would do what I could.

"In that case, even if it didn't have to do with the fan club, I figure I should have a proper discussion with Kanbaru about this, but is there anything I should be careful about when talking to her? The situation has completely changed from yesterday."

"Something to be careful about… I'd like it if you could avoid the storm entirely. I know you might feel a sense of duty, but don't go poking your nose into the murky depths of your juniors."

Her advice was not as a specialist but as a person with more seniority in life, but I wanted Kanbaru, too, to follow these words of Gaen-san, who was called a senior by various people.

Even if I couldn't mention Gaen-san's name.

Even if I doubted that Kanbaru would actually follow them.

"I'll stay at this hospital and do my best with the cell phone analysis while waiting for a report from the search party and preparing for the night."

"I'll meet up with Karen-chan and Kanbaru, and if I have some spare time I'll go drop in on Oikura."

"Putting aside your childhood friend, when it comes to your little sister and Suruga, there's no need to wait until they come back from school. Koyomin, I think you should go back home at least once for a nap. Though I know all-nighters aren't hard on you thanks to your vampire constitution, you must still be at your limit, right?"

That was true.

Thinking about it, vampires, being nocturnal, did go to sleep in the daytime… Just as Shinobu was doing right now.

The truth was, I'd been working out a plan to drop in on Oikura's place until school let out for the day, but it seemed I'd have to abandon that idea.

Even sleeping was work.

Well, if it was around this time, that mathematics maniac was probably in class, too…

"Ah. I know. I'll split the difference and go to Oikura's place to sleep. I have a spare key, after all."

"Childhood friendships are pretty hard for other people to pry into, huh."

I decided to just go to my own home. Of course I needed to catch up on sleep, but I wanted to take a bath, too. Alas, I didn't have any clothes to change into at Oikura's place. I'll do something about that later.

Afterwards, I thought about saying thanks to Ononoki-chan for last night—since I'd left in a hurry, I hadn't been able to talk to her about how she relayed Hachikuji's message to me, or how she called over Gaen-san to the mountain after that.

From Ononoki-chan's point of view, I'd gotten a fortune slip and left all of a sudden, and then decided to go to hell—I probably seemed pretty weird to her… I couldn't bear being thought of as a weird guy by Ononoki-chan.

With both parents working, the first daughter a high schooler, and the second daughter a middle schooler, the Araragi house was generally empty in the daytime—I would be able to speak to Ononoki-chan, who'd infiltrated the house as a stuffed doll, without reservations.

It was one thing to give my thanks, but I figured I may as well tell her that Kagenui-san was approaching this town like a hurricane—for Gaen-san and me, it was an approach that was currently fairly inconvenient, but it could be good news for Ononoki-chan, who idolizes (?) Kagenui-san as an "onee-chan".

Because Ononoki-chan was busy with something else, she wasn't participating in this incident, but it wasn't like she was intentionally left out of the loop, unlike Shinobu until she found out—if the conversation went well, perhaps I'd be able to learn about the past between Suicidemaster and Kagenui-san, which I had failed to ask about, or rather, which I had wanted to hear but didn't want to hear.

Perhaps those ulterior motives led to my ruin, for when I arrived home, it was not just my parents and sisters but also that expressionless, frilly-dressed stuffed doll that was absent.

It seemed that the tween girl was even busier than public servants and middle school students, though not college students.

Well, I'd like to hear as much as what she had to say, but I didn't think it was a past that I wanted to dig into myself… If anything, maybe what I should be doing is to let the foreshadowing die so that her past doesn't get revealed?

Araragi Koyomi, killing the foreshadowing.

With that, feeling a mix of disappointment and relief, I took a shower and crawled into bed.

It seemed I'd been more tired than I realized (perhaps out of

worry, too), so I slept soundly until the afternoon, waking only to the sound of Karen's return—despite her training in martial arts, she was a lot noisier in her movements, so it was easy to hear.

"Yo, Karen-chan. By the way, I wanted to ask about Kanbaru's fan club."

"That's way too direct. I haven't even taken off my shoes yet! At least welcome me back. You gotta have some sort of introduction before starting off the main topic with a 'by the way'. What happened?"

Araragi Karen. Sixteen years old.

She was super tall. My bigger little sister.

Tsuganoki Private High School first-year. She did not take part in any clubs, and continued to attend a martial arts dojo—something like that.

Also, her hairstyle returned to a ponytail.

"Kanbaru-sensei's fan club? Ah, aah. The one that nii-chan smashed up, huh."

"If I didn't break them up, they would've broken me. Just remembering it now, it's super scary."

The fact that she was still calling her Kanbaru-sensei was pretty considerable, but then again, the way Karen yearned for Kanbaru was… pretty unique.

I couldn't exactly give a thorough explanation of the circumstances, so I simply said, "Have you heard anything about, say, them having resumed activities?" and continued the conversation without explaining my reasons.

"Mmm. No, I don't think they have. When an organization like that comes apart once, it's pretty hard to reorganize."

"Is that so?"

"The crux, Kanbaru-sensei, retired, after all. Fans easily heat up and easily cool down."

I see… I guess it was like that.

Just as Karen said, if Kanbaru had continued to be active, then perhaps the fan club could have been passed down to the next generation, but now that the target of their admiration had retired, it was probably hard to gather new members.

And Kanbaru herself wasn't the kind of person that liked attracting that kind of attention, too—I had to admit I felt a bit elated at the inspiration of reading the deciphered code "F/C" as fan club… But I guess it wasn't that easy.

When comparing the girls' basketball team, of which Kanbaru had been a member, with the fan club, which was unofficial and separate… The quality was certainly different—if it became a fan club full of stoicism that could enforce ironclad laws without the actual

person in question, it would be one of the best in Japan.

If only it had been “C/F”, then it could at least have been read as “center forward”, a basketball position…

Well, whether the culprit was in the girls’ basketball team or in the fan club, it didn’t change the reality that the vampire might be nonchalantly attending Naoetsu High—if that was even possible.

Of course, even though Gaen-san had been trying to implicate me, there were quite a few students that had gotten entangled with oddities, like Senjougahara Hitagi, Hanekawa Tsubasa, Kanbaru Suruga, or Oshino Ougi.

Well, a high school girl being a vampire did make for a prettier picture than a high school boy being a vampire—oh yeah.

“Karen-chan. You’re a high school girl now, right?”

“What’s with that, all of a sudden? But, that’s right. I’ve become able to get married.”

“That’s not because you’re a high school girl, it’s because you’ve turned 16 years old. If anything, you’ve gotten harder to marry. Especially for me.”

“Nii-chan, for you I’m the most difficult person in the world to marry. I’m your little sister!”

“How does it feel to be a high school girl? Is everything going well with your new friends?”

Regrettably, I pretended to be an overprotective older brother and started a survey to try and collect some live opinions—could even Karen be mired in the murky depths that had been a downer for the easygoing Gaen-san?

“I dunno what sort of school life you mean by ‘going well’, but this new world is pretty fun. I almost want to go to school on the weekends, too.”

That’s pretty insane.

But that’s true, it’s not like all high school girls have a dark side to them. There are individual differences, and it depends on the environment and the situation.

To put it in a good way, Karen’s personality was endlessly bright, and to put it in a bad way, she was endlessly idiotic, but that wasn’t just it—when surrounded by a stiff atmosphere, even the brightest idiot would lose some of that excitement. However, Karen was a follower of Kanbaru—

“—Oh yeah. Can I ask one more thing, Karen-chan?”

“What is it now? Today, it’s all questions and no groping my boobs, huh.”

“Don’t talk like groping your boobs is a regular occurrence. I’m not going to touch them. This year.”

“It was a problem when you’ve been touching them for the last

year. Touching a girl's boobs like you were kneading clay. And? What's the question you were gonna ask?"

"You know the Fire Sisters, that you and Tsukihi-chan were a part of? You guys disbanded after you graduated, right? What happened after that?"

"Whaddya mean what happened. I told you, didn't I? Now, Tsukihi-chan's working hard on her own as Moon Fire."

I may have heard that before, but regrettably, the information she had on her sister was a bit vague.

Not that I could speak for others, considering I was the same way when it came to that sister.

What I wanted to ask was how the community of Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School changed after Karen, the mainstay and core of the school, left, like with the girls' basketball team—wasn't there anything like a war to be the replacement for Tsukihi's partner, or any sort of factional strife?

"Oh, for that, Tsukihi-chan, as the staff officer, handled it pretty well. For better or worse, Tsukihi-chan thinks she's so special that she doesn't expect anyone else, including me, to be able to imitate her."

I see. I'd been worried about my youngest sister's (excessive) self-consciousness, but that was an insight.

As is often the case with hard-working superstars, Kanbaru's self-esteem was quite low, and she had a tendency to believe that "anyone can do what I can do if they work hard enough"—that was something I could appreciate from a human perspective. However, if someone that was charismatic on a national level said such empty words as "if you work hard, your dreams will come true", then it would lead to a generation of people that actually buy into it.

Even though it wasn't Kanbaru's fault, the current state of the girls' basketball team was probably a climate formed by such a belief in hard work.

If I had to say it, when Kanbaru returned from the club because of her left arm, she should've picked a proper successor instead of leaving everything to Higasa-chan—though it was useless to say that now.

"Tsukihi-chan is basically a 'wasted effort is wasted' kind of girl. She'll say stuff like, 'Instead of hard work, just do what needs to be done!' 'If you put in wasted effort, you'll get even farther away from your dreams!'"

"I can't say that leaves a good impression…"

"She'd always insist, 'Find a way to make yourself a lucky boy or Cinderella girl!'"

"Tsukihi-chan probably shouldn't publish any business books.

Speaking of which, it worries me that Tsukihi-chan, a middle school student, is coming home later than you, a high school student. Rub rub. What in the world is Moon Fire up to now that she's gone independent?"

"I dunno either. Rather than being independent, Tsukihi-chan's always been a dependent person with an independent spirit. Nii-chan, what were those rubbing sound effects you tried to mix in for the first time this year, without even trying to get them lost in the confusion? And I've heard rumors that you were helping out a magical girl, but how much of that is true?"

"Hmm."

Especially with Kagenui-san's return, I wanted Tsukihi to stay quiet, but she wasn't exactly the kind of sister that listened to her brother.

If I'd been able to talk with Ononoki-chan, I could've asked her to do something about that… Rather than worry, it made me a little anxious.

Being a big brother was a lifetime job.

"Then, Karen-chan. I'm going to leave the house now, and I don't think I'll be coming back today, so in the meantime, watch over Tsukihi-chan carefully, all right?"

"You mean, today also, right? College students shouldn't be so flashy with their playing around at night. Your new life is an important time for you, too, nii-chan. I don't want to see you get burned like you did when you became a high schooler."

"Those are useful words. Worthy of engraving onto a chest."

"Don't engrave them on my chest!"

My fearless (of even a god) strategy to get Hachikuji to sit in the child seat ended in failure.

In transporting the ancient vampire from the Kitashirahebi Shrine to Kanbaru's house while waiting for her awakening (sunset), I'd proposed the formation of putting Hachikuji in the passenger seat and Suicidemaster in the back seat, but considering the size of the target of transportation, I was defeated by the logic that it would be legally safer to secure Suicidemaster, a six-year-old girl, in the child seat.

Well, considering that, in terms of outward appearance, Hachikuji was fixed in the form of a ten-year-old in fifth grade, it was already kind of impossible to fit her in a child seat—and Hachikuji was fairly grown for a ten-year-old. Over the past year, I'd directly felt her measurements with my own hands, so this was for certain. Of course, if the child seat itself were to break, it would be the end of everything.

It was a child seat I hoped to use for many years to come.

However, I'd been worried that Suicidemaster would suddenly go berserk in the middle of the day after being taken out of the shrine and lowered from the sacred mountain, so I consulted with Gaen-san on the phone and ended up applying further seals before securing her in the child seat.

The seals that Hachikuji applied as instructed by Gaen-san were, in simple terms, a blindfold and shackles on her arms and legs, but the image of a blindfolded, shackled little girl in white clothes fastened to a child seat honestly did not make me feel the slightest bit of safety in the legal sense.

If I were to go through police questioning, it wouldn't just end with my license being revoked.

My life would be revoked. Societally.

"Aaah. It was fairly controversial for Araragi-san, who loved his bicycle, to start riding around in a car, but I have to admit that the mobility of a car is certainly different. You can go all over the place, in every direction!"

Hachikuji herself seemed rather happy-go-lucky from the back seat—incidentally, she was in outing mode, which meant she'd changed from her white clothing to her clothes for an outing through the town, with her rucksack on her back.

She was sitting backwards, looking out the rear window, and flapping her legs—was it like a field trip for her?

"Hachikuji. Did your daytime stroll have any results? If you

went around looking but couldn't find it, then that would mean the fifth mummy has yet to be made—maybe?"

"I'm not sure. If my godly eyes were able to reach every corner of this town without any problems, you could say this incident would not have happened in the first place. Although it's not that I regret allowing Suicidemaster-san to pass through without security."

"Well, sure."

From Hachikuji's point of view, she might even be a lifesaver—upon Suicidemaster-chan's arrival in Japan, it wouldn't have been odd if she had trampled Hachikuji underfoot, mountain and all.

Even though she was a god, our Hachiku-*jin* wasn't all-powerful—even in her weakened state, it could be possible for Suicidemaster to defeat even an athletic high school girl in a single blow.

"Hachiku-*jin*? Please stop. Don't give me a weird nickname. It seems your respect for gods is lacking, you know?"

Hachikuji did a half-turn and took her seat in the normal position.

"I knew that, with the case of Shishirui Seishirou-san, Shinobu-san had messed up twice, after all. I hoped that this could be an opportunity to wipe away that irreversible trauma—although, it would be a lie to say that I wasn't worried about letting Suicidemaster-san meet Shinobu-san, who was currently practically enslaved by a human."

That's why I'm all for the master-servant reversal, said Hachikuji.

"Although, I think it would be better to be honest about it afterwards. It would be sad to lose a friendship because of vanity. When I was alive, there was a boy in my class that I was close to, but because I'd been too vain—"

"Let's save that story for another time, Hachikuji. When Gaen-san called earlier and taught us about the sealing methods, I tried probing a bit, but it doesn't seem like they've found the fifth mummy yet."

"You seem way too uninterested in my flashback scene, Araragi-san."

"The analysis of the cell phone is still in progress, but it doesn't seem like there's any traces of her having made a call or sent a text or used an app since Kanguu-chan went missing, so it's hard to pin down the time of the crime. In other words, we still don't have proof of Suicidemaster's alibi."

I glanced at the little girl in the passenger seat.

The golden-haired little girl fixed in the child seat, in white clothing, blindfolded, arms and legs shackled.

“Is that so? Well, my credibility is at stake, too. I’ll cooperate to the full extent of my power. Is it fine if I pretend to be a slave, too? Uhehehe.”

“You sound less like a vampire’s slave and more like a slave to money. Mm, I’ve thought about it, but…”

“So you’ve thought about it? Turning Hachikuji Mayoi into a slave?”

“But ultimately, a vampire’s slave should be at least a little vampiric, or the lie will be found out. If it were Ononoki-chan, I may have just barely asked her to, but she’s on bad terms with Shinobu. Plus, she’s away at the moment, so it seems I’ll have to be the only slave. If anything, Hachikuji, you can act as the local deity and be a guarantor for the relationship between Shinobu and me.”

Not a bondsman, but a bondsgod.

It seemed rather apt.

Just as we were about to arrive at Kanbaru’s house, the cell phone that I had left in the cup holder between the driver and passenger seats buzzed. This time, a call from Gaen-san—had the fifth mummy, Kiseki-chan’s mummy, finally been discovered?

I felt slightly nervous, but I was driving, after all, so there was no way I could be the one to pick it up.

I’ll leave it to my secretary.

“Who are you calling your secretary? Yes, hello? This is Hachikuji.”

Seems like you’ve taken a liking to it.

“Araragi is currently driving. Yes. Yes. —Yes, I see. Understood. I’ll let him know.”

Finishing up the short phone call, Hachikuji returned the cell phone to its original position.

“What was it. Did we make any progress?”

“Rather than progress, it’s more like we’ve fallen backwards.”

That was Hachikuji’s response.

“Putting aside the ‘F C’ initials, it seems they’ve completed their brute-force investigation of the remaining members of the girls’ basketball team who were on the register, but everyone has been confirmed to be safe.”

Everyone was confirmed to be safe?

“Isn’t that a good thing? It’s the first good news we’ve heard in a while. What’s so backward about good news that’s really worth celebrating?”

“The fact that they’re safe means that they’re also innocent—the results of the investigation made it clear that there is no vampire among the remaining members of the basketball team.”

Back to square one.

The girls' basketball team members were cleared of suspicion, the fan club was also cleared of suspicion, and there were no signs of another vampire that could be associated with "F/C".

With this, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster wasn't just the prime suspect, she was the only suspect—the only reason that could lead me to believe that she was innocent would be Shinobu's testimony that "Suicidemaster, whose diet is unbalanced to the point of refusing food, would never suck the blood of an immature high school girl".

Tonight's interrogation was becoming increasingly important—it wasn't an exaggeration to say that everything depended on my ability to act as a slave.

I never thought that I would get the opportunity to become a slave to a little girl and deceive another little girl, but I guess I never really know where life will go.

There were many things that made me think that my high school years were the peak of my life, but as I lived on, there were many more interesting things occurring.

And with that, a greeting to my sponsor, Kanbaru.

The sealed little girl and the deified girl had been left in the New Beetle parked in the parking lot of Kanbaru's home—of course, I'd made sure the air conditioner was left on. It certainly wouldn't do if I left two children in a car and came back to find that they'd been mummified.

"Hiya, Araragi-senpai. We only just saw each other yesterday, but it feels like it's been so long ago."

"It hasn't been that long!"

"Yes, now here, the key to the house. Use it however you like."

I figured it was impossible for an ordinary person to imitate this sort of openness—if you tried too hard to act simple, you'd crumble under the stress.

However, they say a person is only as unhappy as the number of keys they have… I wonder how many keys I will have in my lifetime.

"Tonight, we decided to hold a pajama party at Higasa's place. If you've made any progress with the matter from yesterday, I can pass it onto her."

It wasn't progress, but falling backwards.

But it was a bit hard to say that.

However, I couldn't turn back now, and I was committed to it—I wasn't going to pretend that I didn't know anything about the

girls' basketball team now.

Regardless of the outcome of this case, I should work together with Kanbaru and Higasa to come up with a plan to reform, or perhaps break down, the current situation. Without going against Gaen-san. She'd called it a pajama party, but it seemed it was actually a gathering of the OGs of the girls' basketball team to brainstorm about the current situation of the younger team members…

This had nothing to do with Karen's remarks, but as a former near-dropout of that high school, I couldn't just leave behind the students that seemed like they would drop out. Even if it was odd to speak of me, who nearly dropped out on my own, and the club members, who were about to drop out because of their stranglehold from club activities, in the same breath.

"Oh yeah, Kanbaru. When you ended up reuniting with Hitagi-san, the senior that you yearned for, at Naoetsu High, what kind of airs did you put on?"

"Airs? What do you mean by that?"

Of course.

Even if the person she was talking to was a senior she admired, she wasn't the type to pretend to be something that she wasn't—she was the type of person to charge in just as she was. If anything, it was maybe Hitagi-san that was likely to put on airs at the time.

Or display her stubbornness.

As a result, it would end up taking over a year before Senjougahara Hitagi and Kanbaru Suruga, the Valhalla Combination, would reunite.

"Huh. You're talking as if you're looking for wisdom in regards to Shinobu-chan reuniting with an old acquaintance!"

"I didn't talk like that!"

I didn't even bring up Shinobu's name!

She certainly was Gaen-san's niece, and I couldn't let down my guard—if I let something slip, this capable junior might decide to get involved all on her own.

She might decide to pretend to be a slave all on her own.

As someone who felt badly about the fact that I'd gotten her involved in the case of Shishirui Seishirou because of my own personal circumstances, this was a situation I wanted to avoid.

I needed to make up some reason to change the subject and get rid of her as soon as possible.

"Oh yeah, Kanbaru."

"Araragi-senpai, you sure come up with things frequently, don't you. What is it?"

"There's one more thing I wanted to ask of you—"

Though we'd settled on Kanbaru's place for our choice of location, it would be effectively impossible to clean up my junior's disastrously messy room before sunset, and, even if she'd told me to use the house however I liked, it certainly wouldn't do to infringe upon the territory of her grandfather and grandmother, so we ultimately decided upon using the Japanese mansion's garden for the revival of Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

Much like at Ryōan-ji, it was a Japanese rock garden.

Well, even if it was a measure of desperation, the mansion gave off much more of a castle-like impression when viewed from outside rather than being inside.

Yesterday, it had felt like I'd greeted nightfall feeling like I'd run out of time without doing everything I had to do, but today, it felt like I'd done everything I could and was greeting the night having run out of material. Now, I wonder what will happen?

"Thanks for waiting. So, shall we begin?"

At the moment the sun had set about halfway, Gaen-san appeared with a one *shou* bottle—the ones to welcome her were me; Shinobu, who had woken up early and crawled out of my shadow; Hachiku-*jin*, our witness; and Suicidemaster, who had been laid down—it seemed a little too pitiful to lay a restrained little girl on the bare ground, so I'd put down a rush mat (I'd found the rush mat in Kanbaru's room—why did she have something like that?).

All the actors were in place.

The show must go on.

"I've set up a barrier going all the way around the mansion, so if by some chance a battle breaks out, we'll be fine."

"That 'some chance' is what I'd like to avoid… But, Gaen-san. What's with that bottle?"

"Well, I am a specialist, after all. Wine would be better for vampires, but I figured we could do this the Japanese way, with sacred *sake* for a demon."

I guess I couldn't rely on crosses and holy water in a Japanese mansion with a shrine's god present… Her behavior was as if she'd come to a late-night drinking party, but in this Japanese mansion it held an air of sophistication.

"You should've come in full dress, then."

"Did you want to see me in shrine maiden's clothes, Koyomin? Unfortunately, I don't respect formalities and ceremonies as much as Meme does. I may be a pacifist, but at the same time, I'm a rationalist."

Indeed, now that I thought about it, that careless-seeming middle-aged Hawaiian shirt guy was surprisingly pretty picky about arrangements and whatnot to the point of irrationality… And looking closely, Gaen-san's bottle was just a bottle of cheap *sake* from a discount store… It was a bit difficult to call that sacred *sake*.

I guess it's the Gaen way to push through what's difficult.

"Goodness, I never thought I'd be visiting the Kanbaru house that rejected my dear sister like this—the wheel of fate sure turns."

As she spoke in an amused manner, Gaen-san casually turned over the one *shou* bottle and poured it over the body of the little girl.

Rather than an occult ceremony, if anything, it seemed more like the "magic kettle" thing they did in rugby clubs.

Good, judging from that composed demeanor of hers, it seemed Gaen-san had managed to safely get through the murky swamp of the high school girls.

"Ooh. White clothing getting wet and sticking to a little girl's body… Kind of erotic, don't you think?"

Hachikuji made a vulgar remark, unbecoming of a god—for the record, though I hadn't touched upon it (double meaning) out of kindness, when you were meditating under a waterfall for a joke yesterday, you looked the same way, y'know?

Putting that aside.

"By the way, Shinobu-sama."

"…… Hm? Ah, you mean me, my master?"

She wasn't getting into her role at all.

Her servile disposition was so deeply ingrained in her.

"I mean, my servant. What is it?"

"Even if you catch it right away… Well, it's fine. Listen, Shinobu-sama. My master. Would you allow me the honor of inquiring about something from you?"

"If you bring that quality of acting to the real thing, it'll be your fault if we get found out, my mast… my servant."

I think it would be both our faults.

But since we didn't have time, I continued instead of retorting.

"I haven't really thought too deeply about this until now, but… What's it like, living for six hundred years?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, if I may be permitted to speak for myself, I believe I have undergone quite a few changes, just looking back over the past year."

"Speak normally. I can't tell what you're saying at all."

Right.

I didn't even know what I was saying at all.

"In the course of our lives, we change our opinions, change our

minds, realize our mistakes, and learn right from wrong, right? I won't make friends, because my strength as a human would decrease—when I used to say that, I really believed it, and I don't think I could have believed back then that I would have normal friends in college."

And that was in just a single year.

If that had been six hundred years—I'd ended up suddenly wondering how I would feel when I looked back on the past.

"I can't tell what you're saying at all, even when you're talking normally—after all, I've been quick to cast away the past that I can't remember."

Was it because she couldn't remember, or because she didn't want to remember? She probably didn't even remember that.

Well, it's fine. I just wanted something to say at the last minute—not even I, speaking normally, could tell what I was saying at all.

Just because they were meeting again after six hundred years, didn't mean they had to make the same decisions they made six hundred years ago—is that what I wanted to say? However—if I ran into Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade on the verge of death in an alleyway again, what if I would offer up my neck again, just like I had done a year ago?

"In the first place, before oddities are immortal, they're unchanging, universal. They don't change so frequently, like humans do."

"Then, let me ask you the same thing I did in that spring break. Shinobu, to you…"

To you, what are humans?

When Oshino Shinobu had not been Oshino Shinobu, when she had been the vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, she had responded immediately.

She'd responded—"food".

But for Shinobu now, that was incorrect.

Even under the premise that she was sealed—but when you took that out, it was still incorrect.

However, what she would respond was another matter entirely—and it was as if Shinobu had been caught off guard, because for a moment, she fell silent. But, as if aiming for that moment…

"O devourer, o imbiber, o lurker! Now that the holy sun has set, tear open the coffin and rise! Boil the flesh in blood, and stir it with the bones!"

Gaen-san started chanting something like a magic spell that had taken the world by storm a few decades ago—it seemed like a joke, but it was for real, right?

"Come together with the night! Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster!"

It seemed like the sort of hackneyed incantation that I would've been convinced if she'd said, "Just kidding," but in that instant, the little girl soaked in cheap *sake* began to glow gold—or so it seemed.

But it was just my imagination, and my misunderstanding.

In actuality, the girl who had been sleeping as if she were dead had suddenly opened her eyes—the blindfold flew open, revealing two eyes as golden as her hair, and it had felt to me as if they were glowing.

Miss Suicidemaster's facial features, who had previously appeared as expressionless as Ononoki-chan's, became clearer as she awoke—though they had the same golden hair and golden eyes, she gave off a different impression from Shinobu.

The *sake* that had been sprinkled over her evaporated in an instant—not only the shackles on her arms and legs, but even the sash of her white clothing flew off, just like her blindfold.

Had Gaen-san broken the seal, or had the little girl herself broken it? It wasn't clear from afar—but if anything, my impressions were more towards the latter, and I couldn't help but think, "What part of her is weakened?"

I was just beginning to regret my thoughtless act of treatment, which made me recall my actions last spring break, and was wondering if it would have been better to leave her as a mummy, but then…

Creak!

The little girl's face turned towards me.

Lying on her side, only her head turned to look towards me—no.

Not me. Those golden eyes had fixed their gaze upon the one standing in my shadow, the other little girl in this garden—within moments of waking up, the ancient vampire had sensed her former thrall.

And then.

"Ha."

She said.

"Ha." "Ha."

She said.

"Ha." "Ha." "Ha."

She said.

"Ha! Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!" "Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" "Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

She said—sprawled out on the ground, from the lowest position imaginable, her laugh rang out louder than I could have

imagined.

And in response to that loud laugh, Shinobu, who had borne vivid witness to her former “master“‘s revival—

“Ha.”

She said.

“Ha.” “Ha.”

She said.

“Ha.” “Ha.” “Ha.”

She said.

“Ha! Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!” “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

She—laughed in return.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

In the end, Shinobu seemed to have given up on showing off, and thus Araragi Koyomi appeared to have lost the opportunity to show off his skills as an actor.

Once they actually met, such a contrived scheme would have been ridiculous—thinking about it, Suicidemaster was essentially sealed in the form of a little girl, too, so in terms of being a disgrace of a vampire, she was on the same level.

Incidentally, I was using vague wording like “seemed to” and “appeared to” because, along the way, the two little girls had put the humans (including the god that was formerly human) off to the side by beginning to speak in a foreign language—but what language was it, exactly?

Perhaps a language that had been used in one of the many countries that had been destroyed by “Princess Beauty”—regardless, we’d been completely left behind.

However, watching the two little girls act so cheerfully was such a pleasant sight that I couldn’t get mad. It felt like the first time I was seeing Shinobu make such expressions, and from what I could tell, Suicidemaster seemed to be warmly greeting her old friend after such a long time. It was possible that some effect of the mummification remained, because she didn’t seem to be able to pick herself up off of the rush mat, but her expressiveness made it clear that she was truly glad to have reunited with Shinobu.

In a way, it was like our hard work had been rewarded—although, I suppose most of it was just me needlessly worrying.

Not to mention, you could say things had gone just as planned.

The interrogation. About the serial vampirism incident.

Assuming Shinobu hadn’t forgotten about our original objective…

“They seem pretty happy, and the conversation seems to be going smoothly, so let’s leave Hachikuji-chan to be the witness while we humans step away for a moment. Koyomin, come here.”

“Huh? Um, no, but, Shinobu is tied to my shadow, so…”

“I set things up so that within the barrier, the two of you can act separately even while maintaining your pairing, so it’s fine. Hachikuji-chan, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes, leave it to me!”

Hm? Putting aside the fact that Hachikuji had become a loyal subordinate to a person of power despite being a god, what did she mean?

We could act separately?

I wondered if I could do such a thing—wasn't it like the pairing between Shinobu and me was severed, even if it was in a limited area? And did that mean Gaen-san had anticipated from the beginning that their reunion would go well? To put up such a complex barrier—no, before that.

Regardless of whether it went well, had Gaen-san made plans for Shinobu and I to act separately from the beginning?

I didn't really understand her intentions—but, with Shinobu not introducing me to Suicidemaster as her slave, I couldn't exactly interrupt their conversation (the foreign language courses I chose were English and Spanish. Hola!), I guess I had no choice but to follow Gaen-san. Whatever Gaen-san was planning after recovering from the darkness, or mud, in the hearts of those high school girls, I had better hear about those plans—

"I would've liked it if she could have reunited with Shishirui Seishirou in the same way."

That was what Gaen-san murmured, with her words feeling more meaningful than just light conversation, as she led me through the house. And our destination ended up being Kanbaru's room—she sure knew her way around someone else's home. As expected of the onee-san who knew everything.

She was well aware of the location of her niece's room.

"If you know anything about architecture, you can pretty much tell the layout of the rooms from outside—but this is pretty awful. So, like my sister, Suruga's a messy girl, too."

However, it seemed she'd been surprised by the mess, giving her impressions in a shocked manner as she entered the room.

"I'm sorry. Normally I was supposed to have come and cleaned her room yesterday, but Higasa-chan was there, and if I went and started cleaning in front of her friend, Kanbaru would lose face."

"If that's true, then it's exceedingly mysterious why you would go out of your way to care for Suruga like that, Koyomin. Rather than just Suruga's senior, it's almost like you're her mom."

You're even more motherly than her actual mother, said Gaen-san.

I'd been described in many different ways before, but being described as motherly might be a first for me. But, being compared to the famous Gaen Tooe-san didn't exactly make me happy.

"So, what's the matter, Gaen-san? I know Hachikuji is watching over them, but Shinobu and Miss Suicidemaster—or should I say, Little Miss Suicidemaster? Well, it doesn't really matter, but I do feel a bit uneasy just leaving them on their own."

From the atmosphere around them, it didn't seem like it would suddenly turn into a scene of carnage with them saying "I came to eat

you, Shinobu" and "I'll let you eat me" or anything, but I wasn't too optimistic—to get to the point, oddities were oddities because you couldn't predict what they might do in the next instant.

I wanted to return as soon as possible.

"I have two pieces of bad news," said Gaen-san.

With my life as it was, it wasn't too surprising to hear that there was no good news, but for there to be two pieces of bad news.

That was twice the sense of foreboding.

"I'll keep it short. The first is that the last missing member of the girls' basketball team, Kiseki Souwa-chan—her belongings were discovered."

"Her belongings… Just her belongings?"

"Yes. Not just her cell phone and school bag, but her school uniform, gym clothes, and basshoes. Ah, 'basshoes' means…"

"Basketball shoes. I've read 'Slam Dunk', too, so I know what it means. But… Finding only her belongings but not the girl herself…?"

I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing that her mummy hadn't been discovered yet, but the fact that only her belongings were found was certainly bad news—or, perhaps not bad, but ominous.

In the same way you can't start a particularly pleasant story with a school bag being abandoned by the road—I could only assume that something had happened to Kiseki-chan.

"Where were they discovered? In her room, or…?"

Remembering that the second mummy, Honnou Aburi-chan, had been discovered in her room, I brought up the location that would be least discomforting for her belongings to be discovered.

"That's a good line of thought," said Gaen-san. "Where they were discovered was in the gymnasium of Naoetsu High, in a locker in the girls' locker room."

"The girls' locker room…?"

"Don't react to the thought of the girls' locker room. No need to worry, I had a female investigator perform the search."

"It wasn't like I was wondering why you hadn't sent me to perform that task."

Regardless of whether they were male or female, Gaen-san had already crossed a line at the moment she sent an outsider into the school—she was always this sort of person, I suppose.

Alternatively, perhaps there was a student currently attending Naoetsu High that held a connection to Gaen-san, like me last year—it was certainly a possibility.

"More precisely, it's the girls' locker room exclusively used by the girls' basketball team. Each member is provided with their own locker."

The girls' basketball team sure was treated favorably.

If there was stuff like that, I guess it could be pretty hard to quit.

It was all thanks to Kanbaru's achievements, and I couldn't deny that the rest of the athletic department was a bit sloppy—but, in that case, though it wasn't as good as her own room, her locker wasn't all that discomforting to find her belongings in, right?

"In the first place, even if your subordinate managed to invade the girls' locker room, how did they manage to unlock her personal locker?"

"Koyomin, the fact that you think of invading the girls' locker room as completely natural is something I love about you. The personal lockers have combination locks, you see. From the register of names that you borrowed from the previous captain—a treasure trove of personal information—I was able to deduce the combination."

Even if she didn't use her date of birth, it wasn't as important as a bank account password or anything, so I figured she'd use a number associated with her personal information—said Gaen-san, as if it was something obvious to her.

Leaking personal information was pretty scary.

"Using that same approach, I tried to crack the passwords of the cell phones owned by the first three mummies, but unfortunately, that didn't go as well."

"Well, it would certainly be more secure than a locker. Not to mention, if you get it wrong too many times, it could erase all the data inside—but, putting that aside, how should we evaluate this discovery? Isn't it normal to find one's uniform or gym clothes in their locker?"

"If it's 'uniform *or* gym clothes', then yes."

That was what Gaen-san said.

"But if it's 'uniform *and* gym clothes', then that's very strange indeed. Was Kiseki-chan going home naked when she went missing? It would be a big deal, even if she wasn't mummified."

A big deal…

Even if she revered Kanbaru, she probably wouldn't do anything like go streaking (not even Kanbaru had done that. She was all talk, no action).

"It seems unlikely she had a spare uniform or gym clothes, either. It wasn't as messy as this room, but the belongings had been stuffed in the locker pretty sloppily—as if they were getting in the way and thus disposed of."

It was possible that Kiseki-chan was just bad at keeping things in order, but there was another interpretation—the person responsible for attacking her had roughly crammed Kiseki-chan's belongings into her locker in order to hide the evidence.

Not the *person* responsible.

But perhaps—the *demon* responsible.

"Thanks to your reconnaissance, Koyomin, it ended up occurring in the opposite order, but if Kiseki Souwa-chan's mummy had been found first, stripped of all her belongings, it would have been quite an ordeal to try and identify her… In other words, it would have been quite an ordeal to try and resolve this case."

"Is it like how, in mystery novels, the culprit destroys the victim's face and fingerprints?"

When the victims were mummified, you couldn't tell the difference.

As long as there was no blood relation like with Shinobu and Suicidemaster… As long as there was no bond, unbreakable even after six hundred years.

"But it's a little strange. Why is it that they did such a shoddy cover-up job for only Kiseki-chan?"

"It wasn't shoddy, it was malicious. Her cell phone had, of course, been turned off—for items that were shoved in so roughly, the culprit was very attentive to detail. And the fact that a vampire was able to enter the school makes it extremely dangerous for the girls' basketball team."

"……"

That was true—it was an alarming situation.

Although I wasn't sure if that was something that the specialist that had entered the school in the same way should say.

"However, to do such a cover-up job, they wouldn't just need to enter the school—they'd need to be able to open Kiseki-chan's personal locker, right? It may be possible for another member of the girls' basketball team that shares the locker room with her, but I don't think an outsider vampire would have been able to open the locker, wouldn't you say?"

The suspicion on the remaining members of the girls' basketball team had already been cleared—how had that "attentive" vampire unlocked that locker?

A combination lock. A password.

How could you open and close that without breaking it?

Gaen-san's response was clear.

"They spoke with the locker's owner. They had to have heard it from her."

They had to have heard it from her.

There was no other way.

"And then, if I were to presume the reason that the cover-up job was only done for Kiseki-chan, I would arrive at a rather unpleasant conclusion, Koyomin. Basically, it would mean that the

fact that we were using the mummies' belongings to identify them has been leaked."

"Ah."

"There's a high chance that our information is being exposed to the vampire."

Rather than bad news.

It was the worst possible news.

Despite my apprehensions about leaking the girls' personal information, there ended up being a high probability that information regarding our investigation had been leaked, which came as a shock—but the worst news was yet to come.

Earlier, I had likened the culprit's actions to destroying the victim's face or fingerprints in a mystery novel—but could you even take the fingerprints of a mummy? That was what came to mind, so I asked Gaen-san.

The response was a simple "no".

"It's just like how we can't distinguish between their faces. They're just skin and bones, after all. If we could accurately get their fingerprints, then we could've used them for cell phones with fingerprint locks, though."

That's right, in this day and age, fingerprints were also a mass of personal information in that sense, as well—however, coincidentally or otherwise, my question happened to connect to the second piece of bad news that Gaen-san wanted to convey to me by temporarily severing the pairing between Shinobu and me.

"Speaking of a mass of personal information, there's DNA analysis."

That was what Gaen-san said.

"However, we certainly wouldn't be able to do that—if we tried to analyze genes that had undergone vampirification in a hospital, that in itself would be considered a strange disease. It would turn into a panic."

"Yes, of course. That's why I've avoided going to hospitals and getting physical examinations."

"On the other hand, it doesn't mean that the analysis of vampire genes in itself is impossible. We've managed to analyze the DNA of the four mummies discovered so far, rough as it was."

"Hm? Um… What does that mean, exactly?"

"Originally, it was done for the sake of identifying whether all four of them were done in by the same culprit. Considering all the possibilities, it's not necessarily the case that the same vampire attacked all four high school girls, right? You could even come up with the theory that there were four, or perhaps even five, vampires that had visited this town."

What an insane theory.

Especially in this town, which had become overrun with monsters during the absence of a god.

"So, um, what were the results? Don't tell me…"

"Ah, to start with the conclusion, all four mummies had their blood sucked by the same vampire—they're all, so to speak, thralls of the same vampire."

It must be like a DNA test done to determine parentage.

Perhaps, as a result of corporate efforts, the world of oddities has also advanced.

Like Hitagi, who kept going to the hospital because of her symptoms from the *omoshi-kani*, perhaps one day oddity phenomena will end up being simply a rare disease capable of being treated.

"Then, there's no reason to change our plan of action, right?"

"Rather than not changing, at this rate we're going back to the starting point."

Gaen-san said as she folded her arms.

"The problem is that those vampire genes were a pretty close match to Suicidemaster's genes, which I collected last night."

A DNA test to determine parentage.

Gathering evidence based on corporate efforts.

"……"

That—was bad. No, it wasn't that bad, but the reason Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster had been listed as the prime suspect was primarily because of circumstantial evidence and process of elimination—the cryptic message that had been left at the scene of the crime, and the fact that she had come to this town with such perfect timing.

However, DNA analysis was a completely different beast in terms of evidence. In the modern judicial system, it was like the king of evidence, brought out as a trump card.

"That's a dangerous way of thinking about it. There are plenty of examples of DNA analysis having failed, and it's a field with plenty of room for development. Not to mention, human error is something that's unavoidable—treating it as the king of evidence could mean it ends up a hotbed for false accusations."

That was true. It was too early to decide.

Even Gaen-san had been careful enough to word it "a pretty close match"—and, even if Miss Suicidemaster and the four mummies' genes were a match, logically, the vampire genes of Shinobu or me would also be "a pretty close match".

A parent-child relationship—from Suicidemaster's perspective, I was essentially her "grandchild"… Although, right now, Shinobu and I didn't exactly have any bloodsucking abilities…

"Right, so, it's a fact that the suspicion on Suicidemaster has gotten stronger, so the implication of tonight's interrogation has changed—no matter what that little girl says, we're going to have to secure her. That's why I set up this special barrier, although I'd also

like to avoid it turning into a battle if possible. Putting aside me being a pacifist, even if it may be easy to exterminate the starved, weakened Suicidemaster, I don't know how the now-cooperative Shinobu might react to that chain of events—and not knowing how Shinobu might react means not knowing how you might react, Koyomin."

"Um, I probably wouldn't—"

But I didn't exactly know myself well enough to speak at that moment. And last night, I had lost quite a lot of trust, so that would make what I said even less convincing.

"…Even if Suicidemaster, that anorexic vampire, let hunger get the better of her and started laying hands on every high school girl in the area… If we manage to return all the mummified girls back to normal, would she end up not being judged for this incident?"

In the first place, oddities couldn't be judged based on human laws. Even if I couldn't expect her to be certified harmless, couldn't we be flexible enough to let her go in secret…? Although that still left a problem that couldn't be ignored…

"Once a bear has gotten a taste of humans, you have no choice but to kill it—it depends on how much you subscribe to that opinion. In a way, Suicidemaster has been on a diet for six hundred years. Ever since you became a vampire, Koyomin, you've probably never needed to diet, but once you break a fast, you end up on an incredible rebound—you end up eating mountains and drinking oceans."

"But—"

"There's no need to rush, Koyomin. I may have started with the conclusion, but I don't want you to jump to conclusions. There's still evidence to negate the theory that Suicidemaster was responsible for the crime—even if we put aside how much of Shinobu-chan's testimony to believe, there's still the strange idea that an ancient vampire that had lived for a thousand years snuck into the girls' locker room and messed with the lockers. How probable would you say that is?"

It was as she said—and, in the same vein, the attempt to delay the discovery of the fourth mummy, Kanguu-chan, by submerging her in the reservoir was also a weird trick unbecoming of a traditional oddity.

And, under that theory (strange idea?), there was still no explanation for why Suicidemaster herself had turned into a mummy.

There was no logic to her cryptobiosis.

Nothing fit together.

While the suspicion grew stronger, the credibility faded.

In the end, the air of tension had abruptly increased, and there was still no change in the fact that we had to hear from the vampire herself—and it was as I thought that…

“My master.”

From behind the sliding door that I’d closed earlier, Shinobu’s voice spoke.

“Suicidemaster wants to speak with you. Will you talk with her?”

"I'm the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster. You may approach."

It seemed she'd managed to get up, for she was now sitting down on a stone in the rock garden of the Japanese mansion. She greeted me with quite the ghastly smile, not caring about the white clothing that had fallen open when she'd broken the seals earlier. I'd thought this earlier when they were exchanging their roar of laughter, but it seemed the characteristic smile of Shinobu, or Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, was apparently something that was inherited from her progenitor who birthed and named her.

Or perhaps, since they were both golden-haired and golden-eyed, their impressions were similar… However, though they were both little girls, though they had the same expressions, it probably wasn't just my imagination that led me to feel that she didn't resemble Shinobu all that much.

Rather than not resembling Shinobu.

I suppose you could say she resembled *Shinobu from the past*.

That was how easygoing and worldly this vampire had become over the past year—and Suicidemaster must have felt it as well.

"N-nice to meet you. I am Araragi Koyomi. Erm…"

How was I supposed to introduce myself?

Even though I didn't have to pretend to be a slave, it didn't mean I should be honest and explain the situation as-is—it surely wasn't just putting on airs when Shinobu had feared that I might be blown to death if she learned of the situation in which Shinobu had been sealed in my shadow and turned into a slave.

How much of it had Shinobu explained in that foreign language of hers…? In the first place, did she understand it if I introduced myself in Japanese? Judging from her own introduction, she seemed pretty proficient at it…

"I didn't live such a long life for nothing. I've learned most languages by now."

Ooh.

That was something I wanted to tell Meniko about.

"Conversing with your food is one of the fundamentals of a good meal."

…I definitely couldn't tell her about that.

And please don't say something that made you even more suspicious—even though there was some distance, Gaen-san, the administrator of the specialists, was still over there, sitting on the porch of the mansion with Hachikuji.

The value system of food, huh?

Well, even though humans can live just fine on a vegetarian diet, they still go through the trouble of raising and eating meat not "to live" but "because it tastes good", so I couldn't exactly say anything haughtily.

Taking the wrong logic would probably lead us to the conclusion that plants, living off of photosynthesis with sunlight and water, lead the most ethically noble lifestyle.

But, you know, something about her character seemed chic compared to her juvenile appearance. It was pretty dashing the way she wore her white clothing like a gown or a robe, and, well, at the age of six, she wasn't that different from a boy of the same age.

The genuine vampire, the ancient vampire.

What a dandy.

With that in mind, her open white clothing seemed more like a cape than a gown or robe—the little girl held a charisma that made me want to kneel, in a way different from how I felt with "Princess Acerola".

"No need to humble yourself. I won't bite you."

What a fancy figure of speech.

On top of that, the way she said "you"[10] was a nice touch. I wasn't offended at all—this little girl was like a cluster of dandyism. I'd thought of myself as an expert on little girls, but it seemed there was a type like this, too.

"I called you here to give you my thanks—well, not just that, but first, my thanks."

"Th-thanks…?"

"For several things. First off, for reviving me after I'd died—and, even before that, for reviving my former thrall, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade."

I give you my thanks.

Said the little girl, bowing her head—even the way she lowered her head was cool. If she was like this in the form of a little girl, how much charisma could she have had in her heyday?

Or rather, if she so straightforwardly thanked me like this, then it felt like I was beaten to the punch—she'd splendidly gotten the drop on me.

Even though I'd approached this face-to-face meeting with suspicions in mind—and when I looked to Shinobu for help…

"Well, I've more or less told her everything."

That was her curt response.

No, rather than curt, Shinobu herself seemed to be a bit bewildered.

"However, it was a bit meaningless. I myself haven't exactly

grasped the full extent of the situation. At this point, I figured it would be better to have you participate, my master, rather than just talking between us two."

At any rate, she's denied the suspicion of being the culprit behind the serial vampirism incidents, said Shinobu, as if tacking that on at the end—but was that something you should just tack on?

That's like the crux of the crux of things.

Despite my disorientation, Suicidemaster continued.

"Though she was a thrall, Princess Acerola—Kissshot—soon became manager of her own branch. She became independent from me. It's kind of uncool to come crashing in like this as if I were her guardian, but I couldn't stay in hiding when I heard a rumor that she had been exterminated in this country. I just wanted to make sure that she was okay—although she doesn't exactly look okay, but I'm glad she's still alive. In any case, I'm glad I could see her again."

"Uh-huh—"

After six hundred years of no communication, it seemed like a fitting reason for her to come see her with this timing—but with her answering my question before I could ask it, she'd beaten me to the punch again.

Two moves in a row.

That wasn't exactly fair, was it?

In any case, Suicidemaster said that she was worried about Shinobu's safety and came all the way to this country, beating her old bones, to see how she was doing.

It wasn't that she came to dine on Shinobu as gourmet food at all—

"Hmph. I'd thought you'd died, too."

Shinobu spoke bitterly, but she didn't seem all that mad about it.

If it was true that she became manager of her own branch (a phrase that surely sounded strange because she was forcing herself to use Japanese, although it probably wasn't a mistranslation), then it seemed likely that what existed between them wasn't a master-servant relationship, but a friendship.

Friends that could talk to each other and laugh together on equal terms.

Thanks to my relationship with Meniko, I can more or less understand how important that is—there's no room for doubt that I have friendships with Hanekawa, Hachikuji, and Kanbaru, but I couldn't help but feel that our friendships were tied down by love and hate, or by advantages and disadvantages, or out of the obligations of this transient world.

The best example of this would be my childhood friend,

Oikura, but even if our friendship were to end, there would still be the sense that we were inextricably linked.

But the strange thing about human relations is that it's not really desirable to break off relations, like what happened with Sengoku.

"Well, that wasn't the only reason. Even though I'd learned Japanese, I had never actually been to Japan, see. So I wanted to get a look at Mount Fuji."

"What a blatant lie!"

Shinobu sounded as if she was amazed, but look—you told the same lie last year.

A parent-child relationship—a parent-child determination.

"……"

"So, I had a favor to ask of you, former thrall of the former Heartunderblade. I've already confirmed Kissshot's safety, and I'd like to go back to my hideout right about now, but I heard there's something fishy going on. So I was wondering, you think you can help me get out of this country?"

I wondered if she was thinking of the current situation as if she messed up the departure procedures for her destination. Well, that would be a pretty serious situation, too.

"'Specially since there seems to be this scary lady glaring at me," said Suicidemaster, glancing in Gaen-san's direction—but she wasn't a scary lady, but an onee-san that knew everything.

It made for quite the visualization of this interrogation.

"Oh yeah, speaking of scary ladies in this country—nah, that's not important right now. So, how about it? Former thrall of the former Heartunderblade?"

I wasn't sure about how she called me that.

I never thought that she would come ask me for help in fleeing the country… But if Gaen-san wasn't making any move to interrupt, did that mean we should continue with this clumsy conversation?

"I gotta say, I'm pretty happy. Since that 'Princess Beauty' ended up finding her ideal prince and getting her happy ending. But now that I'm here, I figured I'd take this chance to see what that prince can do—how about it? Won't you help me out for a bit?"

Won't you help me out?

Araragi-kun was weak to those words.

The tragedy of my high school years could be said to have all started with those words, and in the end, even Ougi-chan took advantage of them.

However, since then, I'd grown just a little bit (specifically, about a year)—I knew that there were things I could do and things I couldn't.

Even if my girlfriend called me a prince, I knew for sure that I wasn't one.

"Don't say something so embarrassing!"

Shinobu was acting bashful with an unusual level of excitement. What's with that casual language?

Where'd your usual character go off to?

"…A friend of Shinobu's is a friend of mine, so I'm willing to help—but before that, there's something I'd like to make clear. There's something that I absolutely need to make clear—"

She'd called it fishy, but she surely wasn't so uninvolved as to describe it like that—how should I ask this?

If she'd already denied the charges to Shinobu, then it would be pointless to ask her the same thing—should I change my approach, then?

She may have already talked to Shinobu about this, too…

"Suicidemaster. How did you end up turning into a mummy and getting buried in the dirt? An existence as great as yourself."

I didn't really know Suicidemaster well enough to describe her as a great existence (I'd only just heard of her yesterday), but as the progenitor who birthed and named the King of Oddities, it was enough to make me revere her.

Fundamentally…

"Ka ka. I can't say I know how I ended up in the dirt. I figure someone went and buried me on their own."

"Someone…"

"Turning into a mummy? That's a bit easier to explain. I haven't told Kissshot about that yet, either."

Was that so? I looked to Shinobu to confirm, and she responded, "Ah, yes, that's right." Maybe you'd gotten a bit too excited, but if you take such a lazy approach to this interrogation, which was the original goal, then that would be bothersome.

But, well, I guess it was to be expected.

As vampires, where death was a regular occurrence and life was of little importance, the question of "why were you dead" could possibly be too fundamental to be discussed.

Like her catchphrase, "Somehow or other, it seems I've died again"—or perhaps like the nickname, death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire—for Suicidemaster, dying was not at all anything major.

That was how I understood it, but.

"Despite having lived for a thousand years, that may have been the first time I died *like that*, as far as I can remember."

I couldn't help but react to that comment—that was pretty major.

“Wh-what do you mean? What—what was the cause of death?”

Asking the victim directly about their cause of death was what you’d only see in spirit medium-like mysteries, but as I acted that out in real life, Suicidemaster responded pompously.

“Food poisoning.”

“F—food poisoning?”

“Yeah. I ate something weird. Let’s see, in Japanese…”

Said Suicidemaster.

“I guess you would call that type of food, a high school girl?”

“I guess it was like a week ago?

“The unit of time differs from region to region, and, as an ancient vampire, it’s the same to me whether it’s a week ago or a thousand years ago.

“So I dunno if it was a week ago or a thousand years ago—but anyway, a week ago.

“That was when I arrived at this town. The rumored Far East island country, Japan—huh, is ‘Far East island country’ not a compliment?

“Either way, I think it’s a big deal when things are taken too far.

“I came to check on the safety of the legend I gave rise to, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, so it was pretty hilarious that I couldn’t ensure my own safety as soon as I arrived.

“Since I failed to land and shattered.

“Somehow or other, it seemed I’d died again.

“But for me, there was something that shocked me more than the fact that I died—according to the god that came out to welcome me, there’d been some kind of barrier that’d been put up.

“A barrier to protect the town.

“They say, ‘Devils out! Fortune in!’ as part of the traditions of this country, right? Ka ka, ‘Devils out’, huh—that’s a pretty tough greeting for a vampire.

“But that barrier wasn’t the reason I’d broken into pieces, y’know? My certain death, my thousandth, millionth, billionth, or trillionth death was self-destruction from a failed landing.

“Happens pretty often.

“I dunno if that barrier set up by that god was something that she took over from someone or whatever, but it’s not anything with any offensive power—just an interfering barrier that makes you lost.

“In a sense, it’s a pretty nasty barrier compared to the aggressive type of barrier which is easier to understand, but the problem is that that nastiness didn’t work on me at all.

“The security.

“The metal detector at the entry gate, if you will.

“Didn’t respond at all to this Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—in other words, it didn’t even take me as a threat.

“Yeah.

“It wasn’t like I came into this country by breaking through a strong barrier with my tremendous power—it was because I didn’t have that tremendous power that I managed to slip into this country.

“Never thought I would end up being this weak.

“Growing old sucks, huh?

“I didn’t even notice it right away. Kind of a bother that I couldn’t really feel the symptoms—like some old man who doesn’t realize he’s old. Especially when that causes problems for others.

“As I was undergoing an immigration check by that god over there, I belatedly realized what I looked like.

“I’ve heard rumors that Japanese people have baby faces even as they age, but the gods of this country were really this young, was what I thought, excited beyond my years to experience the exotic cultural differences. But there was something wrong.

“*Compared to the young god.*

“*I was even younger*—the tough and cool me was shorter, with a thinner torso, smaller hands, thinner arms, shorter eggs, and a lighter body.

“If there was anything that was long, it would be my hair.

“So that’s what it was.

“You don’t notice changes in yourself until you talk to someone else, until you use them as a mirror—and I’ve been living in hiding for a long time.

“Not that vampires show up in mirrors. So that wasn’t good, either.

“While I was dying uncontrollably and running from vicious vampire hunters, it seemed that I was driven to the point where I couldn’t maintain my perfect body, even in appearance.

“Somehow or other, it seemed I’d regressed into a younger form.

“Before worrying about Kissshot, I needed to worry about myself, first—wasn’t it like I was the one on the verge of death, here?

“According to the god’s meaningful navigation instructions, the legendary vampire whom I named Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade was indeed in this town, but if I were to see her in this state, I would only end up worrying her instead of renewing our old friendship.

“I had a trauma.

“A trauma of letting my once beloved thrall die after making them worry—not to mention I was also in a young form at the time.

“Ka ka.

“It’s ironic that an old vampire, who has stubbornly refused to kill herself, should take on a younger form after living for so long—no matter how many thousand years I live to see history repeat itself, I don’t think I want to repeat my mistakes.

“That’s just me being cool, though.

“To describe it using the words of this language, it would be

‘putting on airs’.

“I held pride in having lived for a thousand years—I held pride in being a progenitor that birthed and named my thrall. Saying I didn’t want to worry her was just a figure of speech.

“Basically.

“*I wanted to put on airs.*

“I didn’t want to disappoint my bud that I’d reunited with after six hundred years—I didn’t want her to think, ‘she’s changed’, but I didn’t want her to think, ‘she’s the same as ever’.

“I just wanted her to think this.

“‘That’s my friend for you.’

“That was what I wanted.

“Now that we’ve met like this and the punch line was that we’d both taken on young forms, it’s obvious how unnecessary trial and error such a thing was, but I was very serious at the time.

“Tough, cool, and serious.

“Of course, I’m making it sound like it was a crazy long time ago, but it was just a week ago—a week ago indistinguishable from a thousand years ago.

“At the very least I thought I’d come in full dress for the occasion, at least on the surface level—even if I couldn’t show up in a complete form, I thought I would at least try to dress up.

“That’s why.

“I made a move on the local food here.

“I bared my fangs—at a high school girl.”

Wasn't this different from what she said earlier? Hadn't Suicidemaster denied that she was the culprit in the serial vampirism incident?

Plus, didn't she suffer from anorexia, unable to take in any other "food" after being entranced by the taste of the food known as "Princess Beauty" six hundred years ago?

Wasn't it that she turned from a mature woman into a little girl because of malnutrition, not because she got older? —Those were the question marks running through my mind.

However, I couldn't say anything.

I couldn't interject into Suicidemaster's narration—and Shinobu stayed silent as well.

What was she thinking? What was she deciding?

To stick with humans, or to stick with oddities.

Was she thinking about that?

Or perhaps, was she still believing in her friend's innocence, even after such a grand confession?

So innocently?

Though it was natural that Hachikuji, a neutral and mediating god, did not interfere here, it was a bit surprising that remained seated on the porch, not moving—with this confession, you would think that it would confirm Suicidemaster's guilt and allow for concrete measures to be taken immediately.

In the end, although we considered various things like if she knew about prime numbers or if she would be able to cover up a crime, but the bottom line was that it was Occam's razor and that ancient vampire was the culprit—was that just the uninteresting truth?

No matter how many question marks danced through my mind, were there any major points of doubt left before the current confession that deserved special mention? Was it right to take the results of the DNA test and the "B777Q" message as they were?

She bared her fangs at a high school girl.

For the sake of putting on airs.

Suicidemaster's nonchalant attitude as she told me that was something that was familiar to me—needless to say, it was the same attitude that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade had during that hellish spring break that I spent.

The fact that they were both trying to make themselves look good for the other party made it sound like a fairy tale with a moral lesson, and I could see how that might be an example of like attracts

like, but when it came to the similarity in their lack of guilt, it wasn't as funny.

During that spring break, that King of Oddities had no qualms about feeding on humans—she even thought that humans were born to be eaten by vampires.

The top of the food chain.

The apex, far above us.

Insensitive to the point that she didn't even consider unabashedly speaking like that insensitive—but as far as Suicidemaster was concerned, it would be not only insensitive but also suicidal to make a speech in front of us here, in the name of confession.

A suicidal act.

A vampire with suicidal tendencies.

That was also familiar to me.

It was a memory fresh in my mind—it would never fade.

Even if a year or a thousand years passed, it would never fade.

Without guilt, without shame, but rather with pride—Suicidemaster continued.

“I went down the mountain where that god lived, and I set my sights on a high school girl walking alone at night—to be honest, anyone would do.

“They were emergency rations.

“Yeah, yeah, of course I know. That way of thinking was opportunistic—really, growing old sucks. I understand why you’re silent here, Kissshot—were you disappointed at my way of thinking?

“If you ask me if I really wanted to bend my policy as a gourmet just to make myself look good, I can only say that I really did at the time.

“That’s why I incurred a punishment.

“If I was going to throw away my policy anyway, I should have thrown it away completely, but I stubbornly clung to my pride as a gourmet.

“Because I still thought in my head that they were just rations for the sake of emergency, I failed to carefully inspect my food.

“I figured I’d eat noncommittally, halfheartedly, without being choosy—if I chose, it would make it seem like that food was ‘special’ to me, y’know?

“I didn’t want that.

“But even though I didn’t want that, I also didn’t want to eat something reluctantly—the ideal scenario would be the food jumping in when I opened my mouth, so that I had an excuse to eat food not in accordance with my will, not measuring up to my level, and not consistent with my beliefs.

“Yes, former thrall of the former Heartunderblade. Just as you treated me to the soup from the Blood Pond Hell—I heard that’s how you ‘reverted’ me, isn’t that right? You have a complex expression on your face.

“Well, once you’ve tasted nectar like from six hundred years ago, you can’t hope for anything better—no matter what you eat, it’s bound to be tasteless.

“Once you know the best of the best, there’s nothing you can do but settle for less—I knew that, but I couldn’t help but still obsess over it.

“So, even if it was for the sake of dressing up, if I went about choosing my food, I would inevitably compare it to ‘Princess Beauty’.

“I guess it was also putting on airs to try and minimize the angle at which I bent my policy? I wonder if it’s like getting old and trying to straighten out your bent back?

“Well, whatever it was, in hindsight, I didn’t exactly have

much respect for my food.

"In this country, you have table manners where you say 'Thanks for the meal' and 'It was delicious', right? I just don't really get those, y'see.

"There isn't a phrase that makes me less thankful than 'Thanks for the meal'… And saying 'It was delicious' is practically the opposite of delicious.

"That was what I thought.

"Just didn't understand the feeling of gratitude towards my food—or the idea that it's great to eat with gratitude, that it's impolite to leave leftovers, or that we shouldn't kill living things for reasons other than eating them.

"Originally, at its best, eating is supposed to be an act of toying with life—it's entertainment.

"So that's why, for me.

"Eating wasn't living.

"Eating was loving.

"At that time, I should have said 'Thanks for the meal'. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. That was what I should have done.

"Nevertheless, in an unprincipled way.

"I sank my teeth into a high school girl as if I was sampling food, like a dieter saying, 'This doesn't really count as eating, okay?'—and so I incurred a punishment.

"The result was food poisoning.

"Thanks to the poison of that high school girl.

"Somehow or other, it seemed I'd died again."

…Huh? What the heck?

Her story had ended so quickly that my comprehension couldn't keep up—to that heavily thematic and therefore weary downer of a story, what had the punch line been again?

Food poisoning?

Was she saying that the blood of Japanese high school girls wasn't suited to her constitution? Just like how travel guidebooks always have it written down somewhere whether or not you can drink water at your destination—whether it's soft water or hard water, unboiled water or drinking water…

Of course, there was also the simple fact that if you suddenly eat something right after starving yourself, you can get sick from it. There have been cases where people have suddenly eaten meat right after dieting, causing an upset stomach—or, in the worst-case scenario, stomach rupture—

Or perhaps.

The high school girls' poison. Mud. Murky.

Even Gaen-san, hardened by years of experience, had been brought down a notch by the murky depths of the girls' basketball team of Naoetsu High, but could that murkiness have come through in their blood, yet another mass of personal information? That's exactly what the Japanese would call, "affected by toxicity"—that murkiness.

Was it in their blood, too?

All of this was just conjecture, and it was probably a complication caused by a multitude of reasons—the explanation that should not be forgotten is that, no matter what country, what shape, what type of non-toxic food, blood or flesh, Suicidemaster's body simply could not accept any other human besides "Princess Beauty".

Rejection. Anorexia.

That in itself was fine.

That in itself, along with ethics, could be put aside for now—in that case, it would end up that Suicidemaster desiccated *immediately after* biting into a high school girl.

Falling into cryptobiosis.

It would end up that she turned into a mummy.

Though there was some embellishment in her talking about herself, it didn't seem like she was lying… But wasn't there something weird about that?

There were four, perhaps even five victims.

But if she turned into a mummy *the very first time*, then the serial nature gets cut off—the serial nature?

Serial nature?

Shinobu had said that Suicidemaster had denied being the culprit of the 'serial vampirism incidents', if I remembered correctly—but that would mean?

"…Oops. Even this onee-san that knows everything has lost her edge."

Gaen-san's voice came like a downer from where she sat.

"In this state, I won't be able to look good to my juniors. I swear I'll never call myself 'Gaen THE Know-It-All Izuko' again."

Er, it's not like you've ever called yourself by that bizarre name before.

What's with that 'THE'?

"If I was going to use as a basis the idea of turning into a mummy after failing to become a vampire, I should have kept in mind the possibility of *turning into a mummy after performing the act of vampirism*—I'd known about it, but examples of such are pretty valuable."

Basis and valuable.[11]

To that usage of homophones, our visitor from abroad raised her golden eyebrows curiously, but I felt similarly—what did she mean?

It didn't really help if you figured it out first.

Even if the cause of her mummification was food poisoning, didn't that just add to the number of mysteries?… What was going on?

At least, I understood the circumstances that led to her mummification.

There are two reasons why you want to eat something. Because you like it, and because you hate it—and there are two reasons why you don't want to eat something—because you like it, and because you hate it.

Both were wise sayings from Hachikuji Mayoi, but for that reason, that's why Suicidemaster went for whatever she could lay her hands on, without being particular or fussy about what she chose.

She went for whatever she could lay her hands on, in a manner quite unbefitting of a gourmet—not to mention, not counting her consumption as a "meal", like the wisdom of a dieter.

Well, you could say the moral to this story was that such cunning wisdom comes at a price, just like in dieting—however, the mystery of who buried Suicidemaster in the mountain after she fell victim to food poisoning and became mummified via cryptobiosis was never fully resolved.

Though I'm sure Suicidemaster herself felt like she wanted to climb into a hole, who was it that literally put that vampire that failed

to suck blood underground?

Who was it that buried her alive?

"The high school girls that became mummified after failing to become vampires—the vampire that became mummified after failing in her vampirism—if I were to add one more pattern to this."

It would be a high school girl that succeeded in becoming a vampire.

That was what the administrator of the specialists said as she stood up.

"I finally understood the reason the series of crimes didn't seem to fit together—it wasn't just one vampire master. Along the way, the vampire was replaced by another."

"R—replaced?"

In mysteries—and this wasn't just limited to Ellery Queen—there were tricks that were considered fair… But I thought having multiple crimes was considered unfair?

And it wasn't like vampires were coming to this town in droves, not to mention there were the results of the DNA test that I'd just heard about—ah.

Late as it was, I finally arrived at understanding.

Upon realizing what the conclusion was, I realized it could only be that—a replacement, a substitution.

Until just the day before yesterday, I hadn't really thought about what would have happened if I had failed to become a vampire, and for some reason at some point, I had assumed that all vampirism had failed in this specific, unusual case—but of course, there was a case where that wasn't for certain.

The case where they succeeded.

The case where, even if the vampire master became a mummy as a result—the thrall was still alive and well.

In other words, if you consider that the high school girl, who was arbitrarily bitten by Suicidemaster the moment that they met, continued on to bite the other high school girls afterwards, then that resolves the strangeness of the crimes not fitting together.

It's no wonder that the DNA test resulted in a "pretty close match"—if it's a parent-child relationship or a descendant relationship, then of course the vampire genes would match.

Whether it was heaven or paradise, as a person who tasted Princess Acerola's saliva in that place, I had to say that it was extremely unnatural how lacking in etiquette it seemed for a gourmet vampire who had experienced the same taste to go on to target only the youth of Japan. But if it was a high school girl targeting other high school girls, it made perfect sense—no.

It wasn't just a high school girl targeting other high school

girls.

If it was a member of the girls' basketball team targeting other members of the girls' basketball team—it made even more sense.

I could think of any number of motives—their murkiness.

Spartan training. Peer pressure. Frustration. Envy. Rivalry. Punishment. Disharmony. Collective responsibility. Discord. Suspicion. Paranoia. Injuries. Stress. Unease. Academic decline—

"Eh? But, wait just a moment, Araragi-san. Hasn't the suspicion on the girlsbas been cleared up already? Have you already forgotten my distinguished contribution as an intermediary for your phone call?"

"Hachiku-*jin*, it would be troublesome if you went that far to take responsibility for acting as an intermediary for my phone call."

True. That was true.

Using the list as a reference, Gaen-san had already confirmed the safety and innocence of every member of the girls' basketball team—on top of safeguarding each of the hundred members, they were also supervising them.

However.

There must really be something wrong with me, to not have realized until now that there was one member of the girls' basketball team that was not being supervised—Kiseki Souwa.

I'd more or less assumed that the "missing person", as Kanbaru had described it, had also fallen victim to the vampire, but even if that had been the truth.

That didn't necessarily mean that she'd been mummified.

Perhaps, she had succeeded in becoming a vampire—and perhaps, in the darkness of the night, she may be seeking revenge on her former human friends.

The ups and downs of realizing that the girl I'd been worried about was actually the vicious assailant of her teammates made for a bumpy ride for my weak mind, but if I were to give up everything now, I wouldn't be able to say I'd grown since my spring break at seventeen or Golden Week at eighteen.

For now, let's pretend that I'm a tough guy that can handle a full revolution on a roller coaster, and sort this out.

Kiseki Souwa.

If I remembered correctly, she was a second-year—of course, even though her name was on the list, she had already gone missing, so unlike the other members of the club, there was no confirmation of her safety. If anything, they were still out there looking for her mummy.

But they wouldn't be able to find it.

If that mummy didn't exist.

How do you account for the uniform, gym clothes, cell phone, and school bag stuffed into the personal locker in the girls' locker room of the Naoetsu High gymnasium?

If she was the one who stuffed everything into the locker herself, then breaking into the school and into the girls' locker room would be a piece of cake—she would use her own route and unlock her own door with her own hands.

If the information on our side of the investigation had been leaked, and if she knew that Gaen-san's team was out looking for Kiseki-chan's mummy, then she could have tried to disrupt the investigation by shoving those personal items into her own locker—even though there was no way to find the mummy itself because it wasn't there, by shoving the uniform and gym clothes in at the same time, the search target pretended as if the damage had already been done.

By fabricating the assumption that she had already become a mummy, she would be able to move as she pleased—and in that case, that would apply to the two living messages, or signatures, that I had asked Meniko to decipher.

"D/V/S". "F/C".

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, and Fan Club—those interpretations of the code were probably right on the mark, but in the end, they were just fakes set up by Kiseki-chan.

When Kiseki-chan had her blood sucked by Suicidemaster, not like a moth to a flame but a high school girl to a vampire's mouth, Suicidemaster would naturally have given her name—as she did to

me, she would have given her name as “Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster”.

In other words, Kiseki-chan remembered the name of the vampire that attacked her—and, assuming she was the one to bury and hide Suicidemaster’s mummy in the mountains.

Her scheme was to blame her own vampiric activities on Suicidemaster.

Like a human.

As Shinobu was now, it seemed that being vampirified by Suicidemaster would lead you to “inherit” golden hair and golden eyes, so I could imagine that her appearance and atmosphere would have changed greatly from her human days.

When I was vampirified by Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, I didn’t gain golden hair and golden eyes, but my body had still become rather muscular even without any training.

We’d wondered whether or not the high school girl had left the school naked with both her uniform and gym clothes being stuffed into the locker, but if Kiseki-chan did in fact bury Suicidemaster’s mummy in the mountain, then that could be explained without a hitch.

The naked little girl’s mummy.

Hachikuji had said that the little girl’s mummy hadn’t been naked from the beginning.

When she was Suicidemaster, before becoming a mummy, she naturally had to have been wearing clothes—so where did those clothes go?

If they weren’t buried with her, then someone might be wearing them right now, after an adjustment to the size—someone who had buried Suicidemaster.

Taking the name of the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, pretending to be her, dressing up as her, and attacking her teammates—it was possible that Kuchimoto Kyoumi, who left that dying message on her flashcards, may have fallen for the fake and left the message “B777Q”, not realizing that the vampire who attacked her had been her teammate.

Or perhaps the message itself was a fake left by Kiseki-chan for the criminal investigation squad—at the very least, “F/C” was certainly that.

I couldn’t imagine how it happened, but when Kiseki-chan found out that suspicion was directed at the members of the girls’ basketball team, she tried to make the investigators look in a different direction.

In other words, Kanbaru Suruga’s fan club.

If she was a member of the girls’ basketball team, which was

strongly influenced by Kanbaru, then there was no way she didn't know about this organization—although it didn't seem like she knew that the group had been disbanded without a trace.

At any rate, she tried to hide herself, hide her crime, try to pin the blame on others, make up evidence, et cetera—

All of these things were things that vampires were not likely to do, and such unnaturalness, more novel than innovative, made sense if you considered that she had *just become* a vampire.

Destruction of evidence, creation of an alibi, fabrication, disturbance—it was a rather human-like crime, by a vampire filled with humanity.

With this, disregarding the mummification of Suicidemaster herself, the mummification of the high school girls may not even be a failure.

In fact, I couldn't help but think that it was Kiseki-chan's revenge to put them in a half-dead state, neither alive nor dead—she could have taken the texture of Suicidemaster's mummy as reference when she was burying it.

And if I wanted to, I could take it as a good sign that she didn't want to fully kill off her friends from when she was human…

"After unraveling all the confusing parts, the problem was just a matter of order. Just like how the second and third mummies discovered were actually attacked by the vampire third and second, Kiseki Souwa, whom we'd assumed had become the fifth mummy, was actually the first victim—no, the zeroth victim."

In other words, like this.

The order in which the mummies were discovered was:

–

The first mummy——Harimaze Kie
The second mummy——Honnou Aburi
The third mummy——Kuchimoto Kyoumi
(The little girl's mummy——DVS)
The fourth mummy——Kanguu Misago
The fifth mummy (assumed)——Kiseki Souwa

–

However, the actual order of the victims was:

–

The zeroth victim——Kiseki Souwa (Culprit: DVS)
(The 0.5th victim——DVS (Food poisoning))
The first victim——Harimaze Kie (Culprit: Kiseki)
The second victim——Kuchimoto Kyoumi (Culprit: Kiseki)
The third victim——Honnou Aburi (Culprit: Kiseki)
The fourth victim——Kanguu Misago (Culprit: Kiseki)

–

That's how it was.

Since all of the mummies were vampire mummies, there wasn't anything like an estimated time of death, so it would be hard to ascertain the time of the mummification for Kanguu-chan, who'd been submerged in the reservoir… But this was the truth behind the serial vampirism incidents that had taken place from the night before last, to last night.

"Oho, is that so. You think of some pretty clever things, both you guys and that high school girl."

Suicidemaster spoke as if she was truly impressed—although it sounded, or at least seemed to sound, like she was making fun of me.

Well, to an ancient vampire who'd seen the fall of a country firsthand, was born in a castle called the "Castle of Corpses", and bore witness to numerous wars, a discussion about five members of a high school club may seem like manual labor on a tiny, millimeter scale to her…

Moreover, while Suicidemaster was not the culprit behind the serial vampirism, she did confess to having started it all—she was the one responsible for the first bloodsucking.

Once again, a progenitor of vampires.

Like a plea bargain, she'd asked for help with the process of exiting the country, but unfortunately, this was not enough for her to get off scot-free.

It wasn't enough—but what sort of verdict would be laid down in a case like this? I didn't have the slightest idea.

Kiseki-chan had been the victim in the beginning, but if she became the main culprit afterwards—a composition in which the victim becomes the perpetrator.

"It kind of resembles Sengoku-san's case, doesn't it?" said Hachikuji.

An unnecessary comment.

"The kanji for Sengoku [千石] and Kiseki [木石] are pretty similar, too."

That one was really unnecessary.

However, Sengoku's case was different.

It wasn't nearly as close as their kanji were.

A high school girl who unexpectedly acquires vampire superpowers makes full use of her power to relieve the anger of her "past life"—if anything, it was a more serious problem than the physiological phenomenon of vampire sucking blood, which was more similar to hunger.

If I had to say it, she was *exerting the fury of a vampire while maintaining her human values*… If she was careless, she could meet the conditions for the "Darkness".

“It ended up not being really clear whose fault it is, right?”

Hachikuji murmured as if troubled, but it was pretty vague to begin with—it wasn’t something I could do anything about by taking on all the stigma myself, like I used to do in high school.

She was too much of a stranger for me to do that.

I wasn’t a politician. I couldn’t work that hard for someone I didn’t know.

It’s not easy to help a girl you’ve never met, never even brushed past—a girl you have no connection with.

“We can think about the rest later, but if there’s anything you need to do now…”

And, as if the composition’s polarity had been reversed, the one who brought up a plan of action to this deadlocked state was none other than Shinobu.

“Don’t you need to stop that vampirified high school girl, a distant little sister in my eyes? Even if the composition has been turned over on its head, what you need to do hasn’t changed much, I should say.”

That was true—however, the way you searched for a dried-out mummy was quite different from the way you searched for a glorious vampire with golden hair and golden eyes.

“If the King of Oddities takes charge, I’ll be put out of business. So, let’s say that the personnel currently assigned to search for the mummy will be assigned to search for Kiseki-chan—who do you think she’ll go after next, Koyomin?”

“Eh… Um, that’s, well, one of the girls’ basketball team members she had strife with… right? So, if we’re trying to anticipate it—”

That wasn’t it.

We’d already more or less anticipated everything—all of the members that were on the list were currently under protection.

There was no way that Kiseki-chan, who somehow got information about our investigation, didn’t know about that—she wouldn’t make the mistake of jumping into the web herself.

“What if she just gave up on the whole revenge thing and just went home to sleep? That’s what I would do.”

Suicidemaster made quite the crude statement with such a serious face—at this point, I had to wonder how I even suspected that this pompous little girl was actually a highly calculating criminal.

She was not highly calculating, just loud.

“Well, it’s true that Kiseki-chan is trying to avoid us. The diversionary tactics and cover-ups are evidence of that—in that case, she probably wouldn’t think of attacking a girls’ basketball team member even through the surveillance. To begin with, it’s pretty

doubtful that there's enough resentment pent up in her that she'd want to make everyone a mummy—I'm sure she had some good friends like normal," said Gaen-san.

The four people that had been discovered as mummies were either the four people that she held the deepest resentment towards, or just the four people that were the easiest targets because they happened to be returning from school alone or had a lot of openings—was it possible she'd relieved all her frustration by attacking those four people?

But I couldn't be optimistic. Rather, as a member of the investigation team, I should assume that the crime would escalate—just as an unreasonable diet leads to rebound, a teenager forced to be stoic in her club suddenly obtained superpowers like in manga, so it should escalate like an escalator—

"! This is hella dangerous, Gaen-san!"

I used a tone of voice I'd never used before—but no matter. I continued.

"Tonight, Kanbaru is having a pajama party at Higasa-chan's house with her friends!"

I was making it sound as if Kanbaru's pajama party was unhealthy, immoral, and outright reprehensible, but that wasn't the point.

It was bad, however, that the retired third-year members of Naoetsu High's girls' basketball team, the OGs of the golden generation, were all in one place, as if they'd all been rounded up.

The golden generation that could even be called.

The mastermind behind the current state of club activities.

The most fitting prey—the main dish.

Hachikuji had highly rated my increase in mobility now that I was driving a car, but at this point, I really regretted not asking my parents for a Formula 1 car when I graduated from high school—or rather, I really regretted not saving up money earned from a part-time job to buy a Formula 1 car.

But even so, I calmly calculated that the fastest way to get to Higasa-chan's house from the Kanbaru family's Japanese mansion was for me to drive my car.

Gaen-san had spread out the manpower she was in charge of for the sake of safeguarding/monitoring the currently active club members, and she couldn't just take away those security measures even if her own relative was involved—or perhaps, precisely because her own relative was involved.

Even so, it seemed Gaen-san seemed to be regretting leaving Kanbaru unguarded, as she spoke from the back seat of the New Beetle.

"Ah, geez. My sister is gonna curse me to death," she said.

Well, it was true that that sister wasn't the most admirable sister, and in fact, you could even say that Kanbaru herself had nearly been cursed to death at one point…

In the first place, it should be considered that because of the case with Kanbaru Tooe-san (and also because of Kaiki), it was hard for Gaen-san to get close to Kanbaru.

So it wasn't like Gaen-san left Kanbaru unguarded because she wanted to… If anyone were to be regretful, it would be me.

I'd made Kanbaru keep her distance from the Kanbaru residence for the sake of her safety, and while I wouldn't say it had the opposite effect, it certainly made it easier for her to be targeted.

I'd foolishly assumed that the vampire wouldn't go after the OGs—it could be said that my narrow-mindedness was the same as it was in high school, but one of the reasons for my foolishness was that I could not connect the girls' basketball team at present with the girls' basketball team of last year.

If only I had noticed that that discrepancy could easily connect to the vampire's motive…

"Well, this is also an assumption, you know. There's no guarantee that Kiseki-chan knows about the Kanbaru Suruga/Higasa Seiu regime, and even if she did, she may just be limiting her scope to the currently active club members."

That was true. That's why she couldn't mobilize her manpower.

Only Gaen-san and I could act at this point—we'd left the barrier that had been set up around the Kanbaru residence, so Shinobu was also with me, but I effectively couldn't expect any cooperation from Shinobu from now on.

Without even sitting in the child seat, she quickly slipped back into my shadow… Well, the promise was that she'd only cooperate with Suicidemaster's interrogation.

"I'm a little worried about leaving Hachikuji and Suicidemaster on their own… Will they be all right?"

"Her case of anorexia seems to be the real deal, so I don't think Hachikuji-chan is going to get eaten up. There's no way she can escape, either—unlike Hachikuji-chan's barrier, the barrier I set up is like a cage. Let's just allow that god and devil to have a fun talk with each other."

That's what Gaen-san was saying, but she'd probably contrived something to get Hachikuji to keep watch over Suicidemaster—even while panicking about Kanbaru, she still hadn't forgotten to set that up.

She hadn't forgotten that Suicidemaster wasn't innocent.

"However… Putting aside the fact that bloodsucking isn't considered evil to vampires—creating thralls also isn't considered evil to vampires, right? Not to mention, in this case, Kiseki-chan very clearly utilized her vampire powers for her own personal, arbitrary reasons. It became a positive for the victim herself, from a human standpoint… So from a specialist standpoint, would you say that it's not evil?"

"We decided to follow Shinobu's plan and think about those difficult issues later, didn't we? Well, if I were to add something to that, Suicidemaster had failed in both bloodsucking and thrall-making for Kiseki-chan. It was a failed attempt."

"A failed attempt…? I dunno about that. Didn't Kiseki-chan succeed in becoming a vampire?"

"What failed was the *creation of a thrall*. Would a devoted servant really bury her master's mummy in the mountains?"

She wouldn't.

It was one of the few fortuitous things in this case that the mountain happened to be the one where Hachikuji lived on—otherwise, Suicidemaster's mummy may not have been found for a much longer period of time.

"It's as if she raised a child the wrong way. Well, Suicidemaster probably didn't bite into Kiseki-chan with the intention of making her into a thrall—she said herself that her intention was just to procure nutrients for the sake of dressing up for her reunion. In a sense, the fact that Kiseki-chan became a vampire unintentionally could be

considered a failure in vampirification, too."

Failures all over the place.

On the other hand, what was thought to be a failure might actually be a success.

"…It's possible for me to imagine that the high school girls who 'failed to become vampires and turned into mummies' still have some room to return to their normal human form. I've seen the potential for that in a parallel universe, you see."

It's because they were failures that they could return to being human.

The reasoning was a bit strange, but it was fine as long as things could get back to normal.

"But even if it wasn't Suicidemaster's intention, she did succeed in one vampirification. So what about Kiseki-chan? Will she be able to return to being human?"

"It first depends on whether she herself wants to return to being human. Well, the world of specialists is also constantly evolving, and we've made more advances in technology since the spring break that you experienced, Koyomin. Although I can't say anything for certain until I see the girl herself—the high school girl with golden hair and golden eyes. The one that has strayed from the wrong path."

It'll probably be something like this—said Gaen-san. And, with me being forced to stop frustratingly at the traffic light, she held out the tablet that she'd been using.

"I tried manipulating a photo of Kiseki-chan and giving her golden hair and golden eyes. I've already sent it to everyone else, so you should use it for reference, too, Koyomin."

So you could even do something like that these days.

Advances in technology.

I decided not to ask about the method in which she obtained the photo, which hadn't been on the text-only list—we were still in the middle of an emergency, after all.

"I can't get close to Suruga, so I can only accompany you to the front of that Higasa-chan's house. So I'll count on you, Koyomin, to directly protect Suruga and her friends. In the meantime, I'll borrow your beloved car and try taking a different approach."

"And what would that different approach be?"

"Obviously that's something to think about now. Anyway, as a sensible college freshman, Koyomin, why don't you go and infiltrate those high school girls' pajama party?"

"That sounds like it will be a tough and cool mission. I always end up playing the tough roles, huh? This is the one thing that won't change, no matter how old I get."

Well, whatever.

After nineteen years, I've gotten used to it. This is my life.

"Perhaps I shouldn't be saying this after having left Suruga unguarded, but there's one thing I'd like for you not to forget, Koyomin."

Said Gaen-san, as she closed her tablet.

"Setting aside Suicidemaster's judgment for now—the question of why she had come to see Shinobu-chan has still been left unanswered. Was she really just worried about her, to the point that she wanted to put on airs to see her, to the point that she scrambled to break her fast that she'd kept for almost six hundred years?"

How much.

How much could we trust her own words?

“It’s Araragi-senpai!” “No way, Araragi-senpai!?” “It’s true, it’s Araragi-senpai!” “By Araragi-senpai, you mean that Araragi-senpai?” “Yeah, it’s that Araragi-senpai! What other Araragi-senpai is there!?” “Hanekawa-senpai’s friend!” “Senjougahara-senpai’s boyfriend!” “Oikura-senpai’s childhood friend!” “And, above all, Kanbaru’s master!” “Naoetsu High’s only delinquent graduate, Araragi-senpai!” “Araragi-senpai!” “Araragi-senpai!” “Araragi-senpai!”

I was extremely popular.

An unprecedented Araragi chanting was occurring right now—I never thought I’d be received so warmly when I crashed a pajama party of high school girls.

Araragi-senpai has also become corrupt.

“Aaararagi! Hey, Aaararagi! What’s up, Aaararagi!”

“Kanbaru. Don’t take the lead.”

You’re doing totally fine, aren’t you.

What’s up with you.

Well, thanks to the benefits of modern science, I had the presence of mind to make a phone call before I hopped into my New Beetle, after all.

“And what’s with those pajamas of yours?”

“What’s the matter, Araragi-senpai. Of all people, you, Araragi-senpai, don’t know about the negligee, pajamas that don’t get in the way of regular affairs?”

“What I don’t know is having a junior like you. Nice to meet you.”

This exchange of greetings turned out to be a big hit with the high school girls—we were in a room on the second floor of the Higasa residence. The eight-*tatami* room, which was normally not so small, had been crammed with clamoring high school girls.

Packed in tightly.

Maybe it was tight because they were clamoring so much.

They were all OG members of the Naoetsu High girls’ basketball team—while Kanbaru’s negligee (when I asked why she was wearing such a feminine nightgown when she was so boyish, she said, “I’m usually naked, so I borrowed it for today.” But who lent you that?) was the extreme example, they were all equally, truly, in their pajamas.

That was where I’d found myself.

Even just getting into the house of Higasa-chan, whom I’d only just met yesterday, required a mental toughness that I probably needed to learn from my smaller little sister—so how did something

like this happen?

It was such a drop that I wanted to ask what happened to the climactic feeling from earlier—what, are there still about 500 more pages in this book?

I thought I'd had enough self control to not end up like this, but what was the difference between me right now and a college freshman who'd lost his grip on studying and was constantly going to mixers?

Well, whatever the case, I could just say I was glad Kanbaru was okay… I had better report to Gaen-san.

"By the way, Araragi-senpai."

Higasa-chan, the owner of the eight-*tatami* room, raised her hand.

"You said that you had something urgent to say about the current state of the girls' basketball team, so I made an exception and let you into this girls-only meeting, but even if you are Araragi-senpai himself, you must observe the dress code."

"Dress code?"

"Pajamas, of course. It's a pajama party, after all."

But there's no need to worry, if you are currently not in the possession of any then we can certainly rent one out, said Higasa-chan in rapid succession, with fluency like flowing water—but, no, of course I wouldn't be in the possession of any.

Well, Kanbaru had said something like that when I had called her—I had halfheartedly agreed to it since I didn't really have a choice, but that really wasn't a joke?

"Yes. Our OG association is run based on strict etiquette. Even if you are a childhood friend of Oikura-senpai."

"That's right. Even if he is a childhood friend of Oikura-senpai."

To Higasa-chan's words, the other association members (?) nodded in agreement—why were they so familiar with Oikura?

The total period of time she attended Naoetsu High shouldn't be that long, right?

"All right, all right—but I'd feel a bit bad if I were to borrow the pajamas of your father or brother without even having met them."

I couldn't just stroll in and say that I wasn't going to follow the rules… And I couldn't just leave, either.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Playing it by ear, it's Araragi Koyomi.

And just as I thought that, I received a remark from Kanbaru.

"Araragi-senpai, Higasa doesn't have a father or brother."

"Eh?"

"Didn't I mention it yesterday? My mom's a single parent. One

mother, one child. With her own hands, she raised me very well. Even now, she's working to help pay for my college education."

So I broke into a household with that kind of background?

Seriously?

Would it even be enough to die and apologize?

"And so, we only have girls' pajamas in our house at the moment, but no need to worry! As you can see, the OGs of the girls' basketball team are pretty confident in their height!"

Yeah, yeah. So what? I wonder what you could mean by that?

With my complaint that I was only going to crossdress only once not being acknowledged by the customer support center, I was stripped of my clothes and made to wear new clothes.

They made me wear silk pajamas that I didn't know to whom they belonged to, and to top it all off, they tied my hair, which I'd been growing out since my spring break when I was seventeen, into twintails.

What merciless humiliation.

A little while later.

"It's not really as cute as I'd been imagining, so it's not exactly what I had in mind, but oh well!" said Higasa-chan, giving her approval for me to participate in the pajama party.

I wasn't sure if she was being tolerant or intolerant.

"Hehe, last year we've been all about sports, and this year we'll be all about exams, but while we're still in high school, we'd like to be able to gain the achievement of playing around with a science-major college student!"

Don't make it sound like putting me in girls' pajamas is some sort of achievement for high school girls.

What a greedy girl.

It seemed like such a blunder that I hadn't gotten involved with such a delightful girl in my high school years.

"Oh geez. What a mess I've gotten myself into. The last time I did something like this was during Pajama Day in an American elementary school."

"Araragi-senpai, you've been to a Pajama Day in an American elementary school before…? That sounds like a problem, even from my perspective. An international problem."

Kanbaru knit her eyebrows together, but her level of formality had dropped. So that was the state I was in right now.

For the record, I'd come rushing over here for your sake, all right?

"Anyway, let's all introduce ourselves for the new member! In a long T-shirt, I'm Higasa Seiu! Born May 3rd, 18 years old! 165 cm tall, my position is small forward, and my favorite play is the steal!"

"In a *jinbei*, I'm Shounou Mitono! Born April 9th, 18 years old! 170 cm tall, my position is point guard, and my favorite play is the double team!"

"In an oversized button-up, I'm Mayoko Reika! Born December 12th, 17 years old! 169 cm tall, my position is shooting guard, and my favorite play is the run and gun!"

“In short pants, I’m Umikawa Nikawa! Born January 18th, 17 years old! 164 cm tall, my position is power forward, and my favorite play is the alley-oop!”

“In a jersey, I’m Sylvia Civia! Born September 19th, 17 years old! 185 cm tall, my position is center, and my favorite play is the block!”

“In a babydoll, I’m Ooki Seiko! Born August 1st, 17 years old, 180 cm tall, my position is the reserve sixth man, and my favorite play is cheering!”

“And I’m Kanbaru Suruga! Araragi-senpai’s ero-slave, my favorite play is abandonment play!”

“You’re the only one with a different goal, huh. The ace shouldn’t be in charge of the punch line! I’ll abandon you forever!”

Why did I have to come hear and listen to these pushy people introduce themselves?

Giving their full names and all. It’s like they were trying to be regulars in the new season.

Six new characters at this level of excitement, huh. Compared to the first- and second-year students, who numbered a total of one hundred, the third year OGs, all together, numbering less than ten, seemed a little small—well, of course.

At least until Kanbaru joined the club, the girls’ basketball team was a normal athletic club in a normal college-prep school—however, it was hard to believe that there were only seven of them.

And why were they all so energetic?

“No, we haven’t had any alcohol!”

“We haven’t told any dirty stories!”

“We haven’t brought any indecent books!”

“Of course, videos are out of the question!”

“This isn’t an exhibition of our dark collections!”

What the heck is a dark collection.

They weren’t just energetic, they were pretty cheerful, huh.

Rather than coincidentally having a group of people like Kanbaru all at the same time (there was no way such a coincidence could happen), the members were most likely influenced by the superstar Kanbaru in a good way.

I guess you could say it was the exact opposite of the current girls’ basketball team—it would certainly be tough if you were asked to aim for these girls as your objective.

They wouldn’t be able to do it.

No wonder they’d stray from the right path.

No wonder they’d become vampirified—although I wouldn’t go that far.

“So, Araragi-senpai? The favor that you asked of me over at

my house earlier has naturally not been fulfilled yet, but what was the urgent motion about the girls' basketball team that compelled you to come over here despite this? We were just about to talk about it, too."

Liar.

I was also lying, but it was way too flowery to be a gathering of people concerned about their juniors—even taking into account Kanbaru's influence and so on, the feeling of "we have been recognized" exuded by high school students who have achieved results at the national level can be pretty overwhelming.

Gaen-san had been poisoned by the darkness of high school girls, but in my own way, it was like I was being poisoned by the light of high school girls.

I couldn't believe that such a group had come together at the same time that I was living my gloomy high school life… No, this wasn't the time to be depressed.

As a bodyguard, I had to stay the night at all costs… Almost frighteningly so. It wasn't just out of politeness that I wasn't immediately leaving after confirming their safety.

Even if it was fine now, there was still a chance that Kiseki-chan could attack the place as soon as I left—even though I had my doubts about whether I could handle being on security, the facts that have come to light indicated that Kiseki-chan was working to thoroughly avoid Gaen-san's investigation team.

As long as I, at the very end of the investigation team, continued to stay in the pajama party room of the Higasa residence, then at least for tonight, the newborn vampire should not try to approach the house.

In the worst-case scenario, Shinobu was here.

Putting aside Kanbaru and Higasa-chan and the others, Shinobu wasn't the kind of person that would choose not to interfere until my life was in danger—or so I believed.

To tell you the truth, I would rather join Gaen-san and be out there looking for Kiseki-chan, but I had a job that only I could do, that only the one at the end of the line could do—and that was participating in a pajama party of high school girls.

Anyway, how should I turn this conversation around?

Now that I'd been caught in twintails, I had better tell even more lies—while I might be able to with Kanbaru, I couldn't exactly tell the truth to any of the other members of the girls' basketball team's OG association, but I couldn't just sit back and stay silent either, when I'd barged in pretending that I had something I needed to talk about either.

But, with me being here, I had to play my part, not just to fool around and entertain everyone, and certainly not to play the role of a

clown that livens up the place.

"About Kiseki-chan—about Kiseki Souwa-chan. I wanted to talk about her."

No. Actually, I wanted to ask about her.

"What kind of girl is she?"

"Oh my, how curious. Didn't I give you that list for this purpose, Araragi-senpai?"

"No, not that—not her profile. I want to know about her personality."

If I knew that, it would be easier to build a plan or countermeasure—I would be able to predict where they were now, what they were doing, what they were thinking about.

If you thought of her as a missing person, then it would be more of a secondary piece of information that could be put off for later, so to speak. But if you thought of her as the criminal, it was the most valuable piece of information.

"Umm. I guess, in a good way, she was pretty hard on herself. And in a bad way, she was pretty hard on herself."

That was what Shounou-chan in the *jinbei* said, choosing her words carefully—although the impression was more that, instead of choosing her words carefully, she couldn't choose her words well enough.

"She pushed herself too hard, and it sometimes produced good results, but when things didn't go well, she got hysterical—it got so rough that she even lashed out at her friends."

"She's the type of person that gets motivated by imagining a supposed opponent, so when things go wrong, she ends up feeling like she's losing. Even though that's not the case."

Higasa-chan in the long T-shirt added—I see, well, it seemed like a personality that didn't contradict the image of the culprit in this case, but looking at things with a calm mind, you could say that everyone and anyone had a similar personality to some extent.

When I asked the other members of the team, I didn't end up hearing any particular characteristic, any personality trait that might be useful for tracking her down.

Incidentally, Kanbaru said this.

"She was an absurdly cute junior! I always wished we could play naked!"

The only personality trait that I could gather from that comment was Kanbaru's… If you were the culprit, it would be easy to set you up for an ambush.

…In fact, things had been much more straightforward in the case of that mummified monkey. I wondered how much difference there was between a monkey and a demon, but at the time, the high

school girl who made a wish to that monkey had ended up targeting—

"In that case, let me change the question. It's about the five team members that have currently gone missing…"

Harimaze Kie. Honnou Aburi. Kuchimoto Kyoumi. Kanguu Misago.

And Kiseki Souwa.

"Do they have any points in common? They happen to be exactly five people—perfect for the number of players on a basketball team. But have the five of them ever been in a game together?"

It's an idea that wouldn't have come up if I hadn't participated in this pajama party, but when she introduced herself earlier, Ooki Seiko-chan had mentioned that her position was a reserve.

If these five had ever played as teammates, perhaps not in an official game, but in a practice game or even an inter-squad match, wouldn't there have been some reserve players on the bench at the time?

And though I feared that Kanbaru and the third-year students of the OG association would be targeted, there was a possibility that Kiseki-chan's next target, or someone who had already been poisoned, would be a reserve player—they are all under protection, but if we manage to identify a single target, we might be able to set a trap for her. At least, Gaen-san would.

However, in response to this reasoning, or perhaps wishful thinking, Higasa-chan shook her head.

"They don't really have any points in common. I don't think they've ever played together in a match—I feel kind of bad saying this, but compared to Kiseki-chan, Harimaze-chan and Kuchimoto-chan weren't all that good at sports, and weren't at the level to participate in games yet."

"Plus, they had completely different tastes in BL."

Uh-huh… As expected, even the missing people outside of Kiseki-chan each had their own personality, so it was hard to lump the five of them together as a team. From what Civia-chan said, I wondered if they could be categorized as BL lovers, but, well, that was probably just a commonality on the level of "breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbon dioxide".

It didn't seem like we could approach this like a question on a Japanese language exam that went, "What are the common characteristics of the following words?"

I then tried to ask the question, "Then, what if it was just four of them?"—in other words, the four excluding Kiseki-chan, the four victims that had been discovered. If they had anything in common other than they were members of Naoetsu High's girls' basketball team, not by gathering information from their cell phones, but by

asking for first-hand opinions.

By gathering information from this cheerful bunch of people, there was no way I'd get drawn into the murky depths of high school girls and become a downer—I imagined that, even if I wasn't very useful normally, I wouldn't become even less usable from this.

And then I realized.

Points in common? The four of them? Cell phones? Usability—

"Ah—wait."

Perhaps. Maybe. Possibly.

Rather than looking for common ground from the five of them.

Rather than assuming they were friends.

If this was a Japanese language problem where you needed to *find the outlier* from the following words—the differences.

Spotting the differences.

Or, like a college freshman attending a pajama party of high school girls, the odd one out.

Ah. So that was it.

I remembered the favor I had asked of Kanbaru. And the conversation I had exchanged with Meniko.

So that's how the information about our investigation was leaked—in that case, this wasn't the place I should be right now. This was definitely not the time to be infiltrating the home of a mother and child, where high school girls were currently gathering.

I was reluctant to leave behind being pampered and toyed with, but I had to leave now—but, it was bad. Fatally bad. My New Beetle had been driven away by Gaen-san.

If I walked, or even ran, would I make it in time?

"Hi—Higasa-chan—"

"Behind you."

"You're not a ninja! I already knew you were there."

I was really curious how she managed to evade my scrutiny for two years at Naoetsu High with a personality like that.

But anyway… Higasa-chan.

"Do you own a bike?"

047

While Araragi Koyomi was getting the inexplicable and hopelessly amusing answer from Higasa Seiu that she didn't own a bicycle but did own a unicycle, a golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl was breaking into the Kanbaru family's Japanese mansion, as if having crossed paths with the college student and the specialist who rode away in the college student's car—the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl, dressed in only a jet-black cloak over her naked body and not even wearing shoes, tried to enter the house without the owner's permission, but…

"Well, well. Not over there, but over here. Been a while, high school girl. Glad to see that you're doing fine."

A voice called out from the garden, and she turned to look at it—on a large rock in a large garden, of which the purpose was not clear to the basketball-obsessed girl, was the little girl she had encountered about a week ago.

The golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl.

Her name was Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, the ancient vampire.

The person responsible for having turned her into a vampire.

No—the demon responsible.

"…You seem to be fine, as well. I could've sworn I buried you, though."

Without showing much surprise, the golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire asked the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl, who for some reason was wearing white clothing with the front open in a rather dashing manner—well, she was an immortal vampire, so it's not like it was worth getting surprised over when she came back to life.

But this was a rather ironic set-up.

She herself, draped in a black cloak, with the little girl in front of her wearing a white cloak in a similar fashion—in vampire terms, would that little girl be considered "Master"?

Master—Suicidemaster.

"Yeah. Somehow or other, it seemed I'd died again—because I drank your blood, or rather, your poison. Good gracious, seems like I've gotten old—to think I can't even drink human poison now."

"Don't make it sound like it's my fault. You're the one who went off and died on your own, you know? All I did—was bury you."

"You didn't just bury me. After that, you went and used my name to do whatever you wanted, didn't you?—thanks to that,

things've been pretty hectic, being accused of dining and dashing by specialists. Even though I want to go home now, I'm being detained here."

Her words were quarrelsome, but she didn't seem particularly mad that her name had been used like that—rather, the little girl seemed like she was enjoying such adversity.

An enviable sensitivity.

If she had even one thousandth of that sensitivity, or even one year out of those thousand years of her life, perhaps she wouldn't have felt those murky feelings in her club activities—perhaps things wouldn't have ended up this way.

Apparently, becoming a vampire hadn't "optimized" her personality in any way.

Or perhaps, at best, this was the extent of the personality of "me".

"Even if it was for the purpose of derailing the investigation, I do feel bad about using your name. But when I buried you in that mountain, I didn't do it with any bad intentions."

The golden-haired, golden-eyed girl spoke honestly.

"Because I felt nothing but gratitude to you. I was intending on giving you a proper burial."

"A burial? Ah, so that's it. That's what it was. Interment, huh?"

The golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl then laughed, "Ka ka."

"However, how did you end up doing it at that mountain? I'm pretty sure that's not where I sucked your blood. It wasn't even close to there."

Why would she care about such a small detail, was what ran through the high school girl's mind. "I heard that there was a shrine on top of that mountain. Kita… something Shrine," she responded.

"If I was going to bury you, I figured it would be better to bury you closer to the shrine, so that it would turn into something like a memorial service… Although it's not like I didn't have the intention of burying you to hide you, I guess? I couldn't just leave you as you were, after you'd become a mummy."

"No, no, I don't really mind. Thanks to your half-assed concern, you could say I ended up actually being discovered earlier."

"?"

"By the way, I've asked the first person to discover my body to step out for a moment—since I failed to suck your blood, it's hard to say that you've become one of my thralls, but still, unlike the completely independent Kissshot, I can at least detect when you approach."

The high school girl was troubled by those incomprehensible

words, together with that dandy smile that you wouldn't think a little girl would have.

"Does that mean you have something you want to say to me, then? Suicidemaster. Don't tell me, not that again? Something about 'Thanks for the meal' and 'It was delicious' or whatever—"

She said it in a rather brusque manner, but that topic was actually pretty interesting to her—it was interesting to her, as someone who'd fallen prey to her club activities—so she'd been able to put it to good use in her acts of violence.

The puzzled faces of her teammates were a sight to behold.

"If there's something you'd like to ask—"

"No, no, there's nothing I have to ask. The former thrall of the former Heartunderblade has more or less told me about what you've done—he seems like a promising guy, but he has the bad habit of letting his guard down around everyone too easily. He'd chatter away at anyone, even someone like me, as long as they played the fool."

"……"

The former thrall of the former Heartunderblade.

The golden-eyed, golden-haired high school girl guessed that she was referring to the alumnus Araragi Koyomi—she had heard some information about the investigation by the specialists, but not the full picture, and she didn't have the ability to analyze the information she had acquired, as she didn't know anything about that world until she encountered that golden-haired, golden-eyed girl just a week ago.

The details could only be imagined, and there was no guarantee those imagined details were correct—however, it seemed for certain that the famous senior was actually a vampire.

"What, then. If you don't have a question, do you have a complaint, then?"

"I don't have a complaint, but there's something I'm not quite satisfied about. To think a bearer of my tough and cool blood would be strutting down the streets at night for such an uncool reason like revenge."

Is that why?

Is that why you became a vampire?

The golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl raised her small chin and spoke in an amused tone, still contrary to the words she was saying.

"You wanted to become a vampire because you wanted to do stuff like that?—Is that why you *wanted me to eat you*?"

"……"

"Ah, I haven't told the people who are after you about this yet. I don't plan on covering for you, but the only reason I sucked your

blood was to put on airs for my old friend—after talking to her, it seemed like she thought the same thing, and, well, to borrow your words, it's not like I didn't have that intention, either."

At any rate.

I didn't tell them that *when I was merely asking for directions*, you suddenly groveled and begged me, "Please turn me into a vampire"—said the little girl, condescendingly.

Perhaps that was just the way she was, but it was irritating. Just as the high school girl always felt when she was participating in club activities.

Or maybe it was like in her rebellious period, when she'd cried to her mother when she was a human, "I never asked you to give birth to me!" But then again, the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl did indeed grovel and plead with the young girl—she'd asked her to *give birth* to her.

"It's not like I was fasting to stay faithful to Kissshot—to Princess Acerola—so if you asked, I had no reason to refuse. I was taking it easy to the extent that I didn't really care if I failed, but it was outside of my expectations that I would be the one to become a mummy. Even after living a thousand years, I guess there are still things outside of my expectations."

So it's like that even after a thousand years.

Then it was natural for a teenager, too—or perhaps, it became more natural the longer one lived.

The golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl became fed up with that thought—fed up to the point that she wanted to die, even though she was currently immortal.

"…Was it just new to you, then? Someone like me. An idiot that would ask to become a vampire herself. An idiot who'd do it without even pretending."

"Nah. There was someone like that six hundred years ago—ka ka, I wonder if I just got sentimental because I remembered that?"

"Sentimental—"

Vulnerable.

"The former thrall of the former Heartunderblade seemed to be having a lot of tedious opinions on the issue of eating—but if you ask me, he's missing the most important point. He's only able to see eating and being eaten in terms of perpetrator and victim—it's not so wrong that I absolutely need to point it out, but from the point of view of someone who's lived for a thousand years, it's shallow, shallow."

In his assumptions about the side being eaten.

He'd left out the case where they desired to be eaten—said the little girl, sticking out her tongue.

"Maybe it's easier if I put it in terms of plants? There are these

things called ‘bananas’. No matter how you look at it, it’s a fruit with a structure designed to be eaten by you primates. It’s handy, easy to hold, comes with a wrapper, and full of nutrients. You can even expect a punch line where someone slips on the peel.”

“Are you saying that the ‘banana’ wants to be eaten?”

Are you saying that because I wanted to become a vampire, I’m a “banana”?

It was like the reasoning that livestock was born to be eaten, so it’s not cruel to eat them—or the same influences that say without question that castrating your pet was for the pet’s own good.

Questions were necessary—even if they were childish.

“What is it that makes flowers bloom so beautifully and produce sweet nectar, high school girl? It’s to get the bees to ‘suck it up’ and spread the pollen, right? Fruits taste good in order to spread their seeds, right?”

“But that’s just plants, right? As if there are any animals that want to be eaten.”

Only me.

“There’s no way.”

“You sure? Wouldn’t you say ‘earthworms’ are in the perfect shape to be eaten?”

“I don’t eat ‘earthworms’.”

“Ah, is that so. It’s good to have likes and dislikes, and preferences. Even disliking a certain food even if you haven’t tried it. But, there are plenty of people who go and make themselves unhappy on their own, right? I’m talking about the ones that drive themselves into a corner and make themselves out to be victims.”

“That’s—”

Only us.

“—Even if there were, there’s no way there’s a creature that willingly asks to be eaten.”

“And like I said, there was one, six hundred years ago. A creature like that—a human like that. A princess like that. Of course, unlike you, it’s not like she was trying to become a vampire for something as disgraceful as revenge or a grudge. She tried to become a vampire with lofty ideals that a tough and cool vampire like me couldn’t understand—unlike you, she was exceedingly productive.”

“……”

Not stillborn—is that what she was trying to say.

“Now that I see she’s completely forgotten and utterly lost those lofty ideals, it seems she’s accomplished them. From the bottom of my heart, I’m relieved. But what about you? Do you feel like you’ve accomplished what you set out to do, eating those humans with your mighty power?”

Being compared to a precursor she'd never met before—the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl felt like she'd been completely seen through.

She felt absolutely no sense of accomplishment. If anything, she felt hollow.

Revenge was futile—she had never thought those cheap words would turn out to be the truth.

From the bottom of her heart, she felt empty.

All dried up, like a mummy.

Having said that, she couldn't just quit now.

Right.

In the first place, she hadn't carried it through just yet.

For that sake—she'd slipped past so many eyes to get here.

"Slipped past? Don't try to show off with your use of words, high school girl—or are you trying to make me laugh myself to death? Scheming, playing tricks, weaving facts with falsehoods, and finally coming here after darting around from place to place like a cockroach. And as far as living goes, the cockroach is superior to you."

"…I suppose so. In that sense, it was a disappointment. A let-down. I thought being a vampire would be better than this. In the first place, doesn't being weak to sunlight make us the worst?"

She'd intended to be sarcastic, but the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl didn't seem to mind. If anything, she spoke with an attitude full of composure.

"That's for sure. We're not all that great. It's like a diet—continuous self-restraint. For the last hundred years, I've been on the run as much as you, scurrying and sneaking around—and now I've been captured here, like it's time to pay the piper. I called you disgraceful, but I'm just as disgraceful."

"…Don't dishearten me so much. This is where you should show off the good points about being a vampire. Should I prepare a whiteboard for you? You can give a presentation aimed at the young people that will soon have the right to vote. Ten reasons why you should become a vampire."

"But for you, you'll never have the right to vote. And what you're feeling now isn't disappointment, it's despair. How befitting of the walking dead."

"The non-walking dead… Are you saying it's better to be a mummy, then?"

She naturally remembered her former teammates, the ones she attacked—although, in the first place, she'd never thought of them as her teammates.

But just as her thoughts grew darker than the night, the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl made an offer. "I have something

good to tell you, you desperate bastard. There's nothing good about vampires, but I have something good to tell you."

"Something good? Like a moving tale?"

"There's no such thing as a moving tale for a vampire. If anything, this is a business negotiation. Right, basically, rather than something good, it's something tasty."

"Tell me."

She bit at it. A prompt decision and a prompt action.

It didn't seem like she would be able to fulfill the *purpose* of her visit to this Japanese mansion—but she didn't want to go back empty-handed.

The investigators were steadily closing in on her.

It was only a matter of time before the cockroach was smashed—she didn't deny that she was drowning in the power she had gained through her pleading, but that didn't mean she was so stupid she couldn't objectively judge her situation.

Her grades had been good. Until she joined the girls' basketball team.

"So, about that tasty something."

"You can go ahead and eat me."

Without an air of importance, the little girl spoke.

"If you, perhaps, wish to return to being human, then you should still be able to do so by sucking out my, your master's, blood."

"…Did I ever say anything about wanting to return to being human? I know I said it wasn't a good thing to be a vampire, but I don't remember saying it was a bad thing, either."

"You said it was the worst."

"That was a figure of speech. Don't find fault with my Japanese. I don't remember saying that being a human was the best—or that being a high school girl was the best."

"If you think like that, then you don't need to drink my blood—just go ahead and gobble me up. Bite into me and break me down into flesh and bone. If you do that, then you can go from being an incomplete vampire to acquiring even further power than now, as the killer of your master. Um, what did they call it again? In terms of smartphone games… A two-stage evolution?"

Not lacking in kindness, she made an analogy that would be easy for teenagers to understand. But a vampire talking about smartphone games…

The gourmet, hungry, and dandy vampire was apparently not very good at presentations.

"Either way, there are no drawbacks for you. If you want to go back to being human, you can. If you want to become an even stronger, more frightening vampire, then you can—at the very least,

you won't have to scurry around secretly like you've been doing now. So, what'll it be?"

"…But what's in it for you, then? That 'something good'. That 'something tasty'. That business negotiation."

As soon as she heard the two choices, she could have decided right away, but the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl cautiously withheld her answer—it was too good to be true, to the point that it was rather suspicious.

She felt like it was a bad idea—to bite at it without closer examination.

"Whether I suck your blood or eat you up, you'll die. After living a thousand years, despite being so tough and cool, you'll die. What's with that. Some sort of self-sacrifice? The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire is going to die just for my sake?"

"As if. A business negotiation should be killing two birds with one stone."

Even with her lower Japanese grades, she knew that "killing two birds with one stone" did not mean that both sides benefited from the deal, but, well, it would be childish to find fault with the freedom of expression of a vampire who'd come all the way from overseas.

"Even if you don't suck my blood or eat me up, I'm still going to die anyway. Like this."

"If things keep up like this, you mean?"

"No, I'll die like this. Whatever I do, whatever I don't do, I'll die. Apparently, I'm at my limit. It wouldn't have been strange if I fell into an eternal sleep after being mummified by your poison—if you hadn't buried me where you did, I would have. By the grace of heaven—or perhaps by heaven's design—I was able to swell back up again, but this is still like a vision I'm seeing on my deathbed."

"You're talking like you've drunk water from the Sanzu River."

"Indeed. The water of a mirage."

For some reason, the frivolous chatter seemed to flow freely.

What was it that she'd drunk?

"I'm starving to death. I'll die of anorexia. Isn't that really lame? That's why, I want you to kill me—*this time*, I want you to kill me. I want you to kill me again."

"……"

"The truth is, I thought I'd ask this of the former thrall of the former Heartunderblade, but he just didn't seem like that kind of character. So I had no choice but to switch to the idea of fleeing the country, but now that you showed up, there's still hope. Hope for a vampire in despair."

"So are those suicidal tendencies, then? I've heard that the

cause of death for eighty to ninety percent of vampires was suicide… Right?"

It was a hypothesis she came up with based on her own analysis of the internal information she'd obtained, so she wasn't too confident about it—but it seemed it was half right, as she got the response, "Yeah. Everyone kills themselves."

"Both Kissshot and her first thrall chose to end their lives in this country—but if you ask me, suicide is even lamer than anorexia. It's not even remotely suitable for the conclusion of my tough and cool story."

So.

Before I start wanting to commit suicide, I want you to kill me.

"So you want assisted suicide—no, euthanasia, then?"

"Death with dignity. That's the only way to die that befits my sense of pride. To die nobly and harshly. I did pretend to be vigorous and in good health with Kissshot—but I was just putting on airs."

It's about the right time to end things, now.

That was what the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl said—but end what? Scurrying around in secret? Or, perhaps, the vampire race itself?

Was she being lectured by her predecessor that, in a world with science in its golden age, there were no shadows or crevices for oddities to live? That such traditions were now tapering off?

She even got a little angry.

The offer certainly didn't have any drawbacks for her, but it felt like she was being forced to quit while she was ahead—could that be called a dine and dash?

"Why me, then? Why did you choose me, then?"

"You're the one who'll choose. I made it sound like there were just two options, but you don't have to suck my blood or eat me up—even in my weakened state, there aren't that many people that can kill me, but I'm not in a hurry. I'm in no rush to die. But I have no more regrets. I've seen with my own eyes how my old friend is enjoying herself, lazily and comfortably."

She had no regrets.

To the ears of the girl who had left behind so many false messages around the high school girls she had attacked, those words echoed with a bitter irony that was even close to abuse.

"So—for that reason, just for that reason, you came to this country, then? So that you wouldn't have any regrets?"

"Yeah. Like, ten things I want to do before I die. If I didn't confirm the safety of the friend I'd fallen for, then this tough and cool me wouldn't be able to die even if I tried."

She couldn't understand.

She couldn't even try to understand.

For her, who'd chosen to become a vampire, the feeling of "not having any regrets"—far from it.

She had nothing left.

No room for decisions. Not even a self.

"I see. I'll kill you, then. Now we're even. I chose to be killed, so now I choose to kill you. Die with pride. Die nobly and harshly."

"Well, thanks for that. I guess my begging paid off."

That pompous attitude you had up until now was supposed to be begging? Far from prostrating herself, she was practically leaning back.

"By the way, what did you choose? Are you going to kill me by sucking my blood? Or are you going to kill me by eating me up?"

"I wonder."

Perhaps sensing that she wasn't going to bother telling her, the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl said, "Well, it doesn't matter either way, as long as you don't fail," and changed her question.

"Oh, yeah. Do you mind telling me your name? I'd like to know the name of the vampire that killed the magnificent me."

"…Fine. I'll tell you that much. The name of your killer is—"

The moment she was about to give her name, and the moment she was about to kill her—

"Harimaze Kie."

Said a voice.

Tactlessly interrupting her from behind.

She turned, and there, gasping for breath, was a twintailed college student wearing what appeared to be high-quality women's silk pajamas—Araragi Koyomi.

In other words, me.

Higasa-chan, like Kanbaru, was on the side that ran for her transportation (what kind of a side was that?) so she didn't have a bicycle, but one of the members of the OG association that had been called to the pajama party, Civia-chan the exchange student in a jersey, had visited the Higasa residence on her bicycle, so I was able to borrow that machine—plus, in terms of speed, you could say it was a Formula 1 car of the bicycle world, a roadracer.

And so, I returned to the Kanbaru residence and finally succeeded in laying eyes upon the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl who had been conversing with Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster in the Japanese garden of the Japanese mansion—Harimaze Kie.

I'd succeeded in laying eyes upon the walking dead that I'd been chasing for so long—yes.

It was Harimaze Kie. Not Kiseki Souwa.

Harimaze-chan, who'd been thought to be the first victim—the first mummy I'd seen at the Naoetsu General Hospital had been introduced to me as such.

A living corpse, dressed in a patient's gown and tucked into a bed—it's ridiculously simple once it becomes apparent that that mummy, that living corpse, was not Harimaze-chan's mummy.

Rather, that mummy was actually.

The mummy of Kiseki-chan, who we'd thought was the main culprit in this serial vampirism incident—in other words, it was replacement.

No, in this case, would it be a substitute?

It wouldn't be correct to say we simply assumed wrong. We were made to assume that—thanks to the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl, freshman at Naoetsu High, member of the girls' basketball team, in front of me.

People who have become mummified get all dried up and have identical physiques and appearances—in a regimented club, even the hairstyles would all be similar, so to me, all the mummies looked the same.

If there was no bond as strong as that between Shinobu and Suicidemaster, there would be no way to differentiate between the mummies—you could even say all the mummies were unidentifiable.

And yet, how did we decide that that mummy was Harimaze-chan's mummy? Because of her personal belongings—her uniform, her school bag, and even her cell phone.

It wasn't just the "first mummy", but the mummies of all the

high school girls that we differentiated in that way. But was that correct?

In other words, if you make a mummy wear your own clothes, carry your own bag, and hold your own cell phone, you can make people think that mummy is you, right?

We had theorized that Kiseki-chan had stuffed her uniform and gym clothes into her personal locker to make herself look like a victim, but we had misjudged the situation from an even earlier stage. We were wrong from the very first step.

We—yes, even Gaen-san had been wrong.

The onee-san that knew everything.

This, however, was inevitable, in a way—Gaen-san was the administrator of the specialists and the leader in charge of the investigation, but she was only a specialist in the field of oddities.

A specialist of monstrous apparitions. A specialist of evil spirits.

A specialist of urban legends. A specialist of secondhand rumors.

A specialist of ghost stories, of oddity stories—in other words.

She was not a specialist of human crimes.

Her focus was on storytelling, so it wasn't like she was trained to see through petty tricks like codes and word games—though I'd spent a year in what could only be described as a scene of carnage, I was not in law enforcement, but neither was Gaen-san.

If the police had been investigating this case, vampirism notwithstanding, it might have been easier than expected to identify it as Harimaze-chan's crime—for example, if they did a normal DNA test, not anything regarding the vampire genes.

But for me, an amateur college student that wasn't even an amateur detective, to find out at the last minute at the scene of a pajama party, I had to rely on a number of coincidences, accumulated theories, and a lucky guess.

The point in common between four out of the five girls—when I tried to think about what the four victims had in common, in a leap, I realized what three of them had in common.

I hadn't found it particularly strange. Because I'd thought it was just a trend or a custom of the girls' basketball team—the smartphone strap.

The strap with letters on it… I'd been aware that some members of the club had had them, and some members hadn't.

However, it was true that, as the number of mummies increased, the ratio became skewed—specifically, out of the four mummies, only the first mummy's cell phone didn't have a strap on it, while all of the subsequent mummies' cell phones did.

On the cell phone of the second mummy—Honnou Aburi-chan.

On the cell phone of the third mummy—Kuchimoto Kyoumi-chan.

On the cell phone of the fourth mummy—Kanguu Misago-chan.

When the second mummy had been discovered, it had been a 1:1 ratio, and when the third mummy had been discovered in that shack, it had been 1:2—not particularly unnatural.

When the fourth mummy was discovered, and the phone with the message left on it had a strap, then even when the ratio became 1:3, you could say that level of skew could be expected—but if Kiseki-chan's cell phone, which was found in her personal locker, also had the corresponding strap attached, then the situation would be different indeed.

1:4.

A commonality among four out of five—however, in this case, the odd one out was not Kiseki-chan, who was supposed to be the culprit, but Harimaze-chan, who was supposed to be the first victim.

Of course, at that point, it was just an assumption. No, it was nothing but an assumption—if Kiseki-chan's cell phone was found to not have a strap, the ratio would be 2:3, which would correct the bias.

However, once I realized this possibility, I couldn't help but think about the possibility that the only high school girl who didn't have a strap was attacking high school girls who did have straps.

And, after thinking about it, even someone at my level of talent could easily deduce that their personal belongings had been switched.

We were already familiar with codes and other diversions, after all—but, to be fair, since the strap thing was just an inference, it was equally possible for any of the mummies to have been replaced.

The probability that Kiseki-chan was the culprit was the same as the probability that Harimaze-chan's mummy was actually Kiseki-chan's mummy, and that probability was the same as the probability that the mummy of either Honnou-chan, Kuchimoto-chan, or Kanguu-chan was actually Kiseki-chan's mummy.

But the key was the code that Meniko solved—the "B777Q" code.

"D/V/S".

It was a false living message, meant to pin the crime on Suicidemaster… Unlike the mummy replacement, which was essentially an attempt to hide her own disappearance, this was clearly a cover-up made with Gaen-san's investigation team in mind.

In other words, from that point on, the information possessed by the investigation team had already been leaked—but it was

unlikely that a traitor existed within Gaen-san's team. If there were, it would probably be me… But by the time I got involved, the flashcards had already been placed in that shack.

Then, how exactly had the culprit come to perceive the existence of Gaen-san and her team? The existence of those that pursued oddities?

My conversation with Meniko ended up being a hint… My conversation on the level of idle chatter, unrelated to the hint at all.

Cell phones were like a part of our brains, she'd said—so what if one's cell phone, together with the school uniform and school bag, was *made by the culprit* to be held by the mummy?

In that case.

You could say—it was like installing the mummy with your *eyes, ears, and brain.*

Or, a surveillance camera and a listening device.

Just like how I was told to keep an eye on Shinobu overnight—the culprit was able to figure out how the mummy that replaced her would be treated.

There are plenty of apps like that, that continue to run in the background even when the phone is locked. To receive the audio and video, she could use Kiseki-chan's cell phone instead—before Kiseki-chan was completely turned into a mummy, the culprit could unlock her phone with her fingerprint, and download the necessary app.

By analyzing the cell phone in various ways, Gaen-san had nearly gotten swallowed up in the darkness of the high school girls, but if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you—and maybe those words should have been taken more literally.

It was a very modern trick.

And without knowing it, we had had conversations and meetings in the hospital where the mummy and her belongings had been placed, and that was how our internal investigation was getting leaked.

As a result, she left the "D/V/S" code for the specialists, and after learning that we'd gotten our hands on the list of girls' basketball team members, she left the "F/C" code—and the important point was that the former could not have been done if the app had been set up at *the discovery of the first mummy*, ignoring the hospital's rule against cell phone use.

If the mummy that was thought to be Harimaze Kie did not have the cell phone thought to be the cause of the leak, then the culprit would not be able to leave a cipher for Kuchimoto Kyoumi's mummy, who was second in the attack order.

At this point, it was almost certain that the replaced mummy

was the one assumed to belong to Harimaze Kie.

However, this perfunctory identification led to one point of concern—because what was more important was that if the cell phone wasn't charged often, it would soon run out of battery. And Gaen-san and the others had no particular reason to keep the password-locked cell phones charged.

In other words, the leak of inside information would automatically come to a halt after a certain point—it could be argued that Kiseki-chan's belongings, including her cell phone (which was the receiver), were shoved into her personal locker because the culprit could no longer obtain that personal information.

With that, she could also suggest that Kiseki-chan had been mummified, or perhaps that Kiseki-chan was actually the culprit, but really those items had fulfilled their purpose—it had probably been Kiseki-chan's cell phone that ran out of juice first, since she was on the run and couldn't keep it charged.

What that meant was, when it came to the information after that—about the fact that I'd chosen Kanbaru's house as the location of Suicidemaster's revival, and about the fact that for that reason Kanbaru had left her house—the culprit had been completely *unaware*.

So while I was just an amateur college student that wasn't even an amateur detective, if you thought about it, the criminal was just an amateur vampire who'd only just become an oddity, as well as amateur criminal—it may have looked like she was doing well, but she had been constantly under pressure and making last-minute decisions, so of course she would make mistakes and misunderstandings.

There were many things that didn't work out the way she wanted them to, and she probably didn't expect a specialist like Gaen-san to exist in the first place—*basically*.

Even if she knew that the other members of the girls' basketball team were under protection and decided to escalate the crime and aim at Kanbaru, the "cause" and "originator" of everything, instead of targeting the OG association at Higasa-chan's house that we had left unguarded, she would naturally go for the Kanbaru residence.

The same Kanbaru residence that we had ended up leaving unguarded thanks to some strange deductions—the same Japanese mansion that we had left Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster and Hachikuji behind in.

That was where she would aim for.

However, all this was reasoning I'd managed to knead together using every means possible after the fact, and the reality was more just a flash of inspiration that I'd gotten for a moment, so how I was going to proceed from here and if I should turn back was a difficult

decision that could not be made in an instant.

It was possible that everything was just my own misunderstanding and, as soon as I left Higasa-chan's house, the vampire (which could be Kiseki-chan, or Harimaze-chan, or someone else) would end up encroaching—and I couldn't deny the possibility that they were getting inside information in a completely different way.

What if the true culprit was watching Higasa-chan's house with an eagle eye?

I couldn't even use my cell phone to make sure Suicidemaster and Hachikuji were okay, like I'd done before I'd come here—as if a vampire and a god, not even high school girls, would have cell phones!

But I couldn't defer my judgment.

I had no choice but to choose between staying in the Higasa residence or rushing over to the Kanbaru residence—and both choices could potentially backfire.

I didn't have time to explain the situation to Kanbaru, nor did I have time to ask Gaen-san to make the decision. Even if that flash of inspiration had been instantaneous, it would take me thirty minutes to explain the whole thing, no matter how fast I spoke, and even the digest version would take eight pages of a novel.

In the end, I had to resort to an underhanded trick in order to prevent my decision backfiring—and that was to shamelessly depart from the front gate of the Higasa residence, still in women's pajamas and twintails. A plan that could not even be called a plan.

In other words, if the inside information had been leaked as I'd deduced, then I should head to the Kanbaru residence, but if it was still being leaked, then they would know that I was still at the Higasa residence—so if a single "girl" in women's pajamas and twintails left from that house, the culprit would think that I was still at the party. Not, by any means, the most elegant idea.

Normally, you wouldn't even call this an idea.

It wasn't even a gamble.

It wasn't that I had considered it—it was that I hadn't considered it.

In a way, it kind of made me feel like I was experiencing the joys of being a college student, as if I'd lost in some party game and was forced to take part in the punishment game of crossdressing and riding a road racer around town. But to start from the conclusion.

To start from the conclusion after that lengthy description, in the garden of the Kanbaru residence where I arrived, the golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire and the golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire.

The purebred vampire, and the former human.

The half naked little girl, and the half-naked high school girl were facing each other—I had no idea how it had come to pass, but at the very moment when the high school girl was about to bite the little girl, I managed to succeed in intervening.

A success? This?

For as much as I'd chaotically thought about it, I'd ended up charging in without thinking as soon as I'd put together some sort of reasoning, just as I'd done in high school. But, unlike my high school days, I was too much of a human for someone who'd intervened in a heated discussion between two vampires.

The two golden-haired, golden-eyed vampires stood agape, as if the appearance of this out-of-place intruder had damped their spirits.

"…A pervert? No, you're Araragi-senpai, correct?"

That came from the high school girl.

She'd corrected herself, but, well, both were correct.

To still call me "senpai" even when I was like this—although, my junior's fashion sense was neck-and-neck with my own, wearing a black cape over nothing.

Harimaze Kie—also a pervert.

Someone who'd had their humanity perverted into a demon.

Just like me.

"Nice to meet you, Araragi-senpai."

It seemed that she'd gotten a decent grasp of the situation, as the golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl's astonishment lasted for only a moment and before changing into a leisurely smile.

"This is the first time we've spoken, but I've heard various rumors, you see—are you helping people, as usual? And yet, there's not a single human here."

Including you.

That was her implication.

Do you have the right to stop me?

That was also her implication.

"……"

Where had Hachikuji gone… I tried to casually take a look around, but I couldn't sense any sign of her.

Perhaps she was in her godly supervision mode.

I had intended to pay attention to this, and she'd told me not to worry about it, but in the end, I'd ended up putting her in between oddities and humans, between a rock and a hard place… I felt ashamed of myself.

And right now in my shadow, Shinobu was also stuck between a rock and a hard place—indeed, the situation was so vague that it was hard to say what would constitute taking anybody's side.

I reflexively stopped Harimaze-chan from attacking

Suicidemaster, but if that had been her attempt to return to human form, as Araragi Koyomi had done in his spring break at seventeen, it certainly didn't make any sense for me to stop her.

Or even if it was for other reasons—considering I was in the middle of helping Gaen-san, was it right for me to stop her from taking out the ancient vampire, who had not been certified as harmless?

Did I have the right?

If Kanbaru and the rest of the OG association were exposed to danger, then I would reflexively choose to fight, but her action had been a swing and a miss—in the first place, what had these two even talked about?

There was no guarantee that the two of them hadn't been complicit in the crime. In that case, it would limit Shinobu's actions—for Shinobu, the vampire born from Suicidemaster, the current Harimaze-chan was like a distant sister—no.

Let's be honest.

Right now, the one stuck between a rock and a hard place was me.

I was stuck between myself as a high schooler, and myself as a college student.

The me from then—and the me from now.

"Hey, Harimaze-chan. In the same way you have an understanding of my situation, I happen to have an understanding of yours…"

Unable to withstand the pressure of silence, I began to speak whatever came to mind—I had no idea how my words would land or how I would end things.

I really should have gotten in contact with Gaen-san.

That was the unfortunate weakness of the bicycle. Even if it could surpass the automobile in instantaneous top speed, it rendered me incapable of making phone calls while driving hands-free.

"I won't say that I understand how you feel. The truth is, I don't really understand at all—I chose to isolate myself, so I can't imagine the stress that comes with being in a group. But even so… You've gone too far."

To attack your teammates.

To mummify your teammates.

That was too far.

"I didn't go too far—I just quit too far. Just because I couldn't quit the club, I suppose there was no need for me to quit living entirely."

"……?"

It almost sounded like she was talking about her

vampirification… What did that comparison mean?

"Ka ka."

From behind, Suicidemaster laughed an amused laugh… What could that laugh have meant?

No, there was no reason for me to wonder about that.

"There's still time. We can think of a way. A way to take back what can't be taken back—to return everyone you've attacked back to normal, and to return you back to normal—"

"Leaving me aside for a moment, I wonder how everyone else thinks?"

Saying that, Harimaze-chan sent a profound glance towards Suicidemaster.

"Would they want to return to being human? Isn't it easier for them right now?—I did attack them, but wasn't it like they were asking for it…? Wasn't it as if they asked me to attack them? Wasn't it as if I helped them, not attacked them?"

Good lord. What was she saying?

Dried up like that, in a state where you couldn't tell if they were alive or dead—

"Being unable to tell whether you're alive or dead… But in high school, everyone's like that, wouldn't you say? Being dried up, too."

After going to college.

Have you forgotten that feeling already?

"Did it look like we were giggling and having a good time? Like high school girls with nothing to worry about? Araragi-senpai."

"……"

She was right.

It wasn't that I couldn't imagine it.

I didn't know, and I didn't want to know, until all this happened—I'd simple-mindedly been jealous of the people sweating in unison in club activities.

"Green as we are in our youth, that shade of green is deeper than you think. It's a dark green bordering on darkness."

In that case, I must have spent a very pale youth.

My youth was like diluted ink.

I'd thought of myself as having had some special experience, going on about my hellish spring break or my nightmarish Golden Week, but was my experience a disaster worth comparing to the bright and joyful youth of a high school girl?

Everyone thinks they're better, they're more important, they have it worse—that they're the most tragic, the most miserable.

"Ka ka."

Again.

The little girl's laugh rang out.

"It's an awkward debate for me to listen to, as someone who's long since forgotten her youth. But isn't that kind of back-and-forth what youth is all about? How laughable. It ended up like this because you couldn't decide fast enough."

Couldn't decide? Decide what?

Was Harimaze-chan being forced by Suicidemaster to make some kind of choice? Or was it me that had failed to make a choice?

A choice—a decision.

"To eat or be eaten—to desire to eat, or to desire to be eaten. That's it."

Or perhaps.

To eat the master, or to eat the main character?

After that profound yet unintelligible instigation from Suicidemaster.

"That's true. Whether it's deep or pale, I've had enough of youth—what I chose was the red darkness. And I was wrong."

So—I'll be even more wrong.

I don't know what kind of switch was flipped, but she jumped in the opposite direction of Suicidemaster, baring her venomous fangs *at me*.

It was a catastrophic act, as if driven by a destructive impulse —with the lingering aftereffects of having been a vampire, I could barely perceive the high-speed surprise attack.

But they were only aftereffects.

Even though I could see it, I had neither the power to stop it or the speed to dodge it.

If I had been in high school, I would have had Shinobu suck my blood beforehand to raise my physical strength, and if necessary, even my immortality, before going into a fight like this. But I already knew that that was a mistake.

I was painfully aware. It was something I knew with every part of my body.

Because I'd made such a mistake, there should have been more I could have said to Harimaze-chan, who was intentionally going wrong.

Because I was an unrelated stranger, there must have been something I could have said.

But I couldn't say anything.

Because I was no longer in high school.

"Oh, I almost forgot! But this time, for sure!"

She shouted. The golden-haired, golden-eyed high school girl shouted.

"I'm Harimaze Kie! Born April 14th, 16 years old, 179 cm tall,

my position is a reserve, and my favorite play is—the fake!"

The basketball player who had been deceiving, outwitting, tricking, and playing us, for whatever reason, introduced herself as if a self-introduction was a form of etiquette before killing someone—what an incredible bookend technique.

There was no mention of what pajamas she was wearing, but as a vampire who was only active at night, there was no way she could have placed an order for such nightwear.

"*This time, for sure*—I'll eat up the main character!"

And yet, I wasn't eaten.

Because Hachikuji leaped out from where she'd been hidden and saved me—but that wasn't the case. Because Shinobu leaped out of my shadow and saved me—but that wasn't the case, either.

Neither of them could have made it in time.

Made it in time before Harimaze-chan ate—a knee.

In other words, they wouldn't have made it in time before Harimaze-chan ate a knee kick to the top of her head—a human knee, which could only be described as being dropped like a missile from above, landed savagely on the vampire's head.

Needless to say.

"Long time no see, Araragi-kun. Thanks for buyin' me some time. Twintails actually look pretty good on you."

Needless to say—it was the knee of Kagenui Yozuru-san.

The specialist specializing in immortal oddities.

Also known as the violent *onmyouji*.

She'd easily dismissed my life-threatening negotiations as "buying her time", but it was almost disgustingly obvious why she'd been able to make it in time—why the final weapon, who was expected to arrive no later than tomorrow at the earliest, had arrived so early.

I should have thought better about why Ononoki-chan hadn't been in Tsukihi's room during the day—obviously, as a *shikigami*, she must have gone to pick up her master, right?

There was no way that capable tween girl would be just a messenger for Hachikuji's message. If it was her, she more than likely deduced everything just from that—not to mention, she'd acted as the direct connection between us and Gaen-san.

For a doll that can only follow orders, if there's one thing she can do based on her own judgment, it would be for Kagenui-san's sake—as a means of transportation faster than a bicycle or car for Kagenui-san, who could not walk on paths.

Most likely, from far away, Yotsugi-chan fired the missile known as Kagenui Yozuru using "Unlimited Rulebook" at Harimaze-chan… Although, it may have not been Harimaze-chan, but at

Suicidemaster instead.

Or, perhaps, even at me.

Ononoki-chan's throw was such that a direct hit on someone was all that was needed, and Kagenui-san's choice of landing spot just happened to be Harimaze-chan, who was taking action—the exact opposite of Suicidemaster trying to avoid Hachikuji.

In terms of basketball, it would be a long pass… After all, in this garden.

There was not a single human here.

"You're going too far… Kagenui-san."

I couldn't help but point that out to the specialist that further stomped on, like a rug, Harimaze-chan who had been folded into the ground like a tent, just as she'd once done to me before.

"Haven't I told ya before, Araragi-kun? There's no such thing as doin' too much fer immortal oddities."

Ain't that right, Suicidemaster?

With the high school girl still trampled underfoot, Kagenui-san called out to the little girl behind her, without even turning around.

It was an indescribable tone of voice.

"Not at all. Even a monster like me can tell that you've gone too far, Ka-ge-nu-i. A terrifying little lady as always—you've sure made a mess of things. No—you've stepped all over it."

With a calm and composed demeanor, yet with an atmosphere that drew a line between now and when she was dealing with me or Harimaze-chan, Suicidemaster spoke to Kagenui-san.

Had she drawn a line, or had she crossed it?

Or perhaps, had she crossed the threshold of battle?

As Gaen-san had hinted, whatever connection there was between Kagenui Yozuru and Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, there was no doubt in my mind that it was not a good one.

"I'll be the one to play with you, so just leave her at that. You've already blown away her consciousness and her mind. She's not enough of a vampire to be able to deal with you yet. She's just a fledgling."

"Not enough of a vampire to deal with me? A fledgling? Ain't that what ya are right now?"

"A little girl, just like you were back then. Ka ka—looks like this isn't going to work out. It's true that I'm not exactly a worthy target in your eyes."

"…Seems like it. Even though I literally flew here from the North Pole for ya, yer in such a sorry state. Looks like I got no choice but to let ya go for today."

"How lucky. Though I dunno if it's you or me that's lucky. Somehow or other, it seems I've lived again."

“Shut up.”

Kagenui-san gave a forced sigh, and then pointed at her feet.

“By th’ way, Araragi-kun. Who’s this?” she asked.

Well—even if you ask who…

Was I supposed to say she was Harimaze Kie-chan? Although I’d pointed it out and she herself had spoken it at the very end, it had been a name that she’d kept secret for a long time… Pretending to be somebody else, leaving the signature of somebody else.

Just as Suicidemaster had been the one to name Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, or perhaps just as Oshino Meme had been the one to name Oshino Shinobu, then should I be the one to give the golden-haired, golden-eyed girl a new name here?

It would be cool if I could give her a name like the something-something, whatever-whatever, yadda-yadda vampire, an elegant and eccentric name filled with love and hatred, as a present—but unfortunately, I was neither tough nor cool.

Yes, just like her.

If I hadn’t failed—if I had become a vampire correctly.

“That girl—that demon.”

She encountered a vampire, and was attacked by a vampire.

She yearned to become a main character, and yearned to become a monster.

She desired friends, hated friends, and hurt friends.

After a depressing youth that made her sick of being human, after having obtained special powers, the high school girl that was finally crushed by a specialist, who couldn’t be a demon, couldn’t be a person…

“She’s me. Someone exactly like me.”

“What?”

The epilogue; or perhaps, the punch line.

It's a common scene in gourmet shows that a Japanese person travels to the United States, eats the California rolls served there, and proudly says that this dish is not sushi, but surprisingly, Japanese people who talk like this do not give much thought to what Indians think about curry bread.

One man's fault is another man's lesson, and treat others as you would have them treat you—but even so, it is very difficult to see ourselves and others in the same way, and sometimes people want to be treated in ways you don't want to be treated.

In the first place, there was no way that I, who had voluntarily offered my neck to the vampire, could lecture Harimaze-chan about this, but at that time, instead of just playing innocent, I should have dug deeper into myself.

If I had taken a step in the wrong direction, I might have ended up like Harimaze-chan—was a line that was nothing but arrogance, and to be honest, I couldn't really empathize with that girl to that extent. But there had been a lot to learn from confronting that golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire.

I couldn't say I got much out of it, but I did learn a lot.

"So? What did you learn this time, Koyomi? If you're okay with me, I'll hear you out."

"Oh, shut up. Don't just appear as soon as it's safe to do so. If that's the only way you can make an appearance, then just retire already. Make way for the next generation."

In the university cafeteria, while having tea with my girlfriend from high school, Senjougahara Hitagi, I told her about the series of events that had happened—aside from her annoying pattern of appearances, it had been a promise established some time ago, since we'd started dating, that we would not keep secrets from each other in the event of some oddity-related happening.

It was hard to say that I'd completely kept that promise, but, well, it was a promise that was still valid.

After entering college, Senjougahara Hitagi had gone to a hair salon to dye her hair brown, had gone to a nail salon to decorate her nails, had joined a club to go on trips and concerts, and, unlike me, had become very cool and stylish, but fundamentally she was a serious college student.

She was lodging at a women's share house where many international students lived, and she was aiming to learn five languages by the time she graduated—perhaps this was because of

Hanekawa's influence, but she was no ordinary person to be looking ahead to her graduation despite being a freshman.

Even though I was still in the process of looking back on the past… Right, I'll cry about this inferiority complex together with Oikura next time.

"So anyway, a princess in heaven fed me her saliva via mouth-to-mouth…"

"Even if this was occuring during your near-death delusions, aren't you a bit too candid? I know you couldn't have gone as far as drawing blood, but couldn't you have gone with something more romantic, like her tears?"

"And then I ended up participating in Kanbaru's pajama party as a surprise guest…"

"That's certainly a surprise to hear, being your girlfriend. What in the world are you doing with my junior?"

Retorting appropriately with a jab after every comment, Hitagi-san finally finished listening to my entire story.

"So, what happened to that high school girl after that? Harimaya-chan, was it?"

We'd entered the Q&A session.

But who the heck is Harimaya-chan.

I was telling you this in shame, so listen properly.

"How rude, I was listening properly. Ah, this lamb sandwich, delish."

"Is that comment the result of you listening to me properly? In that case, I'm never going to tell you things again. If you're talking about Harimaze-chan, then I assumed she'd ended up getting absolutely slaughtered by Kagenui-san, but."

For this time alone, I wasn't sure I could stop her when that happened—after all, what Harimaze-chan had done was way too atrocious. Hospitalizing as much as four high school girls was basically just a normal crime—I didn't think the spirit of the Juvenile Act would get through to Kagenui-san.

"In order for the four hospitalized girls to recover, there was no choice but to give her a special pardon, which feels more like adult matters than applying the Juvenile Act. After all, if we didn't turn her back from a vampire into a human, those four would remain mummies forever."

"Oh? But, once you became a vampire, in order to turn back into a human, didn't you have to perform the act of parricide? Although, as a fathercon, that's quite the repulsive word to even grace my lips."

"Isn't it more repulsive to proclaim yourself to be a fathercon? And I never said anything about parricide—it's true that, during that

spring break, that was the only way, but these days, we can thank advances in technology."

Rather than advances in technology, I could venture to say that it was one of the few contributions I had made in my high school days —well, no, I suppose it was more of a fluke.

If you recall, the method making use of two demon blades, which had been carelessly used to make me "fall to hell and come back to life".

It turned out that, if we applied that method to a human who'd just been turned into an oddity, we would just barely be able to turn them back into a human—since the technique was still in the experimental stage, I suppose Harimaze-chan would be able to get her sentence reduced for participating in that human experimentation (or rather, demon experimentation).

I guess it was like doing community service for a punishment.

I couldn't help but smile bitterly at the fact that the fruits of my folly were now becoming an established tradition, but it was one of the few things I was able to do for Harimaze-chan as her senior, so that's that.

From the perspective of Kagenui-san, who had come all the way back to Japan, it must have been rather incomprehensible, but with Suicidemaster so weakened, and the actual vampire responsible having been knocked out in a single blow, it probably wasn't all that exciting for her sense of justice.

It was ironic that Kagenui-san's arrival, which I had been fearing so much, had ended up saving my life—so ironic that it made my shoulders feel weak… It was probably more of an anticlimax for that violent *onmyouji* who'd ended her training at the North Pole for this, but it seemed she'd concluded things with owing Gaen-san one—I suppose that was also adult matters.

"I see. So what happened to the naked little girl?"

"In the end, they settled on expelling Suicidemaster from the country—forced deportation. Apparently Gaen-san herself will be sending her off, which is quite the heavy security for one little girl, but I suppose it's unavoidable."

Of course, the decision had been made by Gaen-san, but I could assume that it was also the arrangement of Hachikuji, who was in charge of the town… As the new god to rule over the peace of the town, she wished for the visitor she'd invited to receive a peaceful exit.

After that, we prepared another chance for Suicidemaster and Shinobu to talk things out, just the two of them—and I have no knowledge of what Oshino Shinobu talked about with her friend from six hundred years ago.

Just as I had no knowledge about Suicidemaster and Harimaze-chan talked about—one day I might end up learning about it, but it seemed that day wouldn't be today.

"It seemed they parted ways refreshingly, though. I don't know if that's due to vampire senses, or their vampire sense of time, or what."

"For sure."

"Don't just say 'for sure'. Don't just show understanding when I don't know something. I do get it a little bit. Well, it's probably not their last farewell or anything, and I'm sure they'll meet again."

"……"

Why are you staying silent now? Did you figure something out?

Come to think of it, Shinobu also seemed to know something that she was keeping from me… I had no right to blame Shinobu for that, seeing as I hadn't told her I had met Princess Acerola in heaven, but what she'd been hiding was eventually made evident in the comment she made afterwards. It was a late response to my question, "what are humans to you?"

"They're monsters, right?"

Was she referring to Harimaze-chan, or the girls' basketball team members in general, or Kagenui-san, or humanity as a whole?…

"Koyomin. In the end, does that mean your verbal agreement with Gaen-san is fulfilled? That's where it all started, right?"

"I thought it was denied after I betrayed her once, and at some point I didn't really care anymore about that, but it seems that the agreement was fulfilled after all."

Or perhaps she just normally dumped me. Perhaps it was the case where, being someone who acted arbitrarily on their own against the chain of command, she had to lay down a judgment as a commander.

However, it seems that, even for Gaen-san, this was an incident that she had a lot to reflect on.

"Whether it's lies, deception, or fakes, when the human nature of humans gets involved in this way, establishing a Rumors Squad has become pretty urgent. The time has finally come."

That was what she'd murmured before leaving this town together with Kagenui-san—they'd left Ononoki-chan behind again, but was that all right?

How long is she going to stay at our place?

"Well, this goes for Harimaze-chan, too, but the fact that she allowed it means that, in the end, I'm pretty much still just a kid."

"My, my, how modest of you. Aren't you the one who got to the bottom of the truth, Koyomin? I used to think that Tsubasa-chan

was suited to be a detective, but Koyomin, aren't you more suited to be a police detective in the future?"

"You can only call me Koyomin once per day."

I should have made my promise be that she would stop calling me Koyomin, instead of breaking off relations for four years.

"I don't want to be a cop. With a future like that, I know I'll never be able to surpass my parents. To tell you the truth, I have other dreams. So I'll leave that kind of thing to Meniko."

"…You should introduce me to Hamukai-san already."

"Ah, just, well, wait a little longer. I've been thinking about it for a while, but yeah, the timing just doesn't seem right."

"How annoying. I won't do anything to her. What do you think I'm going to do to your new friend? I'm not Oikura-san."

"Hitagi-san, who likes to bash Oikura at every opportunity… For the record, in my mind, you're not that far off from Oikura, you know?"

It's just that you've been rehabilitated now. There was a time where you were in much worse shape.

"Is that so. So the other me that could have been me, was actually Oikura-san, huh?"

"Don't act like you were listening to me against your will."

Incidentally, it seemed that the codes that Meniko solved had both been made by Harimaze-chan… Even the book by Ellery Queen that had been in Kuchimoto-chan's bag had been slipped in by Harimaze-chan as a petty trick.

Anyway, as if sensing that the flow of the conversation was becoming inconvenient for her, she looked at her watch as if she'd just realized.

"Oh dear. I'm going to be late for my next lecture," she said, getting up from her seat. "Then, some day, in the near future. If I need something from you, I'll contact you."

"That's just a stock phrase for when you're not going to contact me…"

"Oh my."

At that point, Hitagi noticed the strap I had affixed to my cell phone.

"You've got something cute there, don't you?"

Whoops, I should have kept this hidden.

I didn't feel guilty about it, but it was embarrassing.

It was a strap with letters of the alphabet—the letters "F C".

It was a non-existent fake, "F C".

That day, I had asked Kanbaru to make this for me. No, it had just been a quick request that I'd come up with as an excuse to distract Kanbaru, who had started to suspect something, but it was true that it

had been a clue.

So, after the incident, I put the finished strap on my cell phone—however, I didn't put it on with a sense of pride, as if I were wearing a medal on my chest. Rather, it was a lesson. A bitter lesson.

You could even call it a wound.

That is because the hypothesis that "wasn't Harimaze-chan the only one to not have a strap" which was the main reason for going back to the Kanbaru residence was, frankly speaking, completely off the mark—later, I confirmed with Gaen-san that Kiseki-chan's cell phone, which had been found in her personal locker, did not have a strap with her initials on it.

So the "pro-strap, anti-strap" structure that I had envisioned didn't actually exist… Based on a false assumption, I had arrived at the truth.

In mathematics, it was like getting the proof wrong but the solution right, which made me neither a great detective nor a decent cop.

In a sense, it was just like me, and the results were all right.

It was possible that the constantly-faking Harimaze-chan had removed Kiseki-chan's strap when she put it in her personal locker, so I couldn't say it was completely incorrect…

"Koyomin, were you also a member of the girls' basketball team?"

"Haha. Well, I've gone too far to turn back now. I'm happily cooperating with Kanbaru and Higasa-chan with their plan to do something about the current situation."

"Isn't that what makes you still just a kid, Araragi-kun?"

Neither affirming nor denying me, Hitagi-san smiled and headed off to her lecture—strangely enough, even though we were in the same department, my girlfriend and I rarely shared the same classes.

Maybe it's because I'm taking so many bizarre classes—I'm still just a kid, huh.

Those words reminded me of the question that I had asked Kagenui-san that night. This was what I had asked her.

Kagenui-san, don't you ever get lost?

Even though what she'd done was an unforgivable crime in terms of both human and demon law, I had to take into account Harimaze Kie's circumstances—just like with Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, and going back, just like with Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

I would think about it, and I would get lost.

I couldn't think that I was right. I couldn't believe in myself.

It was absolutely impossible for me to kick a target on their

head like that, down in a straight line like a laser beam—I would wobble this way and that.

Once again, this was a series of conflicts, decisions, and mistakes.

I didn't think it was the only correct solution at all, but it seemed as if there had been no process to Kagenui's knee kick that came out of nowhere—in retrospect, when she and I had duked it out, she did whatever she wanted, and when she quit, she quit without hesitation—she didn't quit too far.

There was no hint of remorse, no taste of regret.

How was she able to do something like that?

I wasn't thinking that I wanted to become like her, but I couldn't help but ask anyway. And in response…

"I won't get lost. 'Cause I'm an adult," she responded curtly.

Even in her unique response, which surely did not represent the majority opinion, there was no hesitation—but, I understood.

If that's an adult, then I was certainly still a kid. Nothing but a kid, even younger than a little girl.

Like the vampires who were granted a stay of execution—whether it was becoming immortal, going to hell, graduating high school, or becoming a university student, Araragi Koyomi was still in the middle of a moratorium.

Afterword

There is a suggestion to those so-called mystery novels that says that “Stories about murder are imprudent and really disgraceful”, but it is really fundamentally just the case that they are imprudent and disgraceful, so if I am confronted with such a complaint head-on, I tend to lose the will to argue back. I can think of various rebuttals like, “They’re just (friendly) mind games between author and reader” or “It’s just fiction, so you should just enjoy it” or “It’s a tradition that needs to be passed on”, but basically those are just superficial vindications that were thought up after the fact, and it is quite doubtful that there is a reason to read a mystery novel other than “because it is interesting.” In this work, Araragi-kun who has become a college student and Suicidemaster discuss this point, but even if we eat food to live, we eat meals because they taste good—or something like that. If the only reason we eat is to live, then the question would become why we add condiments to our food (putting aside Hanekawa-san, who doesn’t use condiments), not to mention I can’t help but think that anyone who says “Thanks for the meal” is enjoying themselves. Returning to the topic of mystery novels, a suitable rebuttal to someone criticizing them as “imprudent” could be to say, “Why do I need to be prudent?” (there have been many periods in time where being prudent was a necessity, so this rebuttal may not exactly be correct), but it’s complicated by the fact that the sound criticism of them being “imprudent” is also a superficial criticism. If you dig deeper, you’ll find that “imprudent” and “disgraceful” are reasons they think of after the fact, and their first impression is often “I don’t like how interesting it looks”. Like this, it would be like arguing with your cards face down, and you might end up suspecting each other’s true intentions—perhaps it may be groundless suspicion, or perhaps it may be entirely justified.

Anyway, this was the new season of the Monogatari series, featuring Araragi-kun in his first year of college. I was wondering what it would be like, but since I’d already written about Araragi-kun when he had come of age and found a job, I was able to write this surprisingly smoothly. For Araragi-kun, it seems that his campus life is not going to be as smooth, considering he suddenly has to work with Gaen-san, but I’m glad to hear that he was able to make some new friends. But, well, despite calling it a new season, I’d like to maintain the usual feeling of tension that this is already the final volume. With that, this was the twenty-third installment of the Monogatari Series, “Shinobumonogatari—Chapter One: Shinobu Mustard”.

The cover was drawn by VOFAN-san, showing Oshino Shinobu

with her sword drawn. Thank you very much. If possible, the next volume will feature Hachiku-*jin* as the main character, so please help me out again.

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

The obvious question that may or may not be on everyone's minds—is the title of this arc "Shinobu Mustard" or "Shinobu Mastered"? I wouldn't be surprised if most people favored "Mastered", considering Shinobu's encounter with her former master Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster in this arc—however, the themes of eating and being eaten, together with the mention of condiments in the afterword, make for a pretty interesting case for "Mustard" being just as applicable. It could be a simple matter that the author saw the word "master" rendered in Japanese (*masutaa*) and found it amusing that it wasn't that far off from "mustard" (*masutaado*), so perhaps you could say this is a practical joke of sorts. While this translation had no choice but to choose one word over the other, I encourage you to think deeply about what the title could mean and come to your own conclusions. If you feel as if you've come even a smidge closer to this work as a result, I would consider it a great success.

On behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading "Shinobumonogatari"—but also, I would like to thank you for reading my translation, lacking as it may have been.

Polaris

Updated January 24, 2024

Notes

[←1]
切望 *setsubou* “earnest desire”, 絶望 *zetsubou* “despair”.

[←2]

カオス *kaosu* “chaos”, 顔 *kao* “face”.

[←3]

Sea hares are called アメフラシ *amefurashi* in Japanese.

[←4]

雨を降らした *ame o furashita*, “made it rain”.

[←5]

忍 Shinobu is the first kanji in 忍者 *ninja* “ninja”. Mayoi says 野武士 *nobushi* “wandering samurai”.

[←6]

幼女 *youjo* “little girl”, 養生 *youjou* “sanitation”.

[←7]

幼女幼女 *youjo youjo* “little girls”, 要所要所 *yousho yousho* “important points”.

[←8]

幼児 *youji* “child”, 用事 *youji* “business”.

[←9]

俄 *niwaka* “suddenly”, 我 *ware* “oneself”. There’s a difference of the “person” radical [□] in the kanji.

[←10]

貴様 *kisama*, an extremely rude way of saying “you”, almost like “you bastard”.

[←11]

基調 *kichou* “basis”, 貴重 *kichou* “valuable”.